

STEPHENIE MEYER

AUTHOR OF THE - DESTSELLER LICL PEE

PESTSELLING AUTHOR

Melarrie Stryder refuses to fade away.

Our world has been invaded by an unseen enemy. Humans become nosts for these invaders, their minds taken over while their bodies remain intact and continue their lives apparently unchanged. Most of humanity has succumbed

When Melanie, one of the few remaining "wild" humans, is captured, she is certain it is her end. Wanderer, the invading "soul" who has been given Melanie's body, was warned about the challenges of living inside a human, the overwhelming emotions, the glut of senses, the too vivid memories. But there was one difficulty Wanderer didn't expect; the former tenant of her body refusing to relinquish possession of her mind.

Wanderer probes Melanie's thoughts, hoping to discover the whereabouts of the remaining human resistance. Instead, Melanie fills Wanderer's mind with visions of the man Me mie loves—Jared, a human who still lives in hiding. Unable to separate herself from her body's desires, Wanderer begins to yearn for a man she has been tasked with exposing. When outside forces make Wanderer and Melanic unwilling allies, they set off on a dangerous and uncertain search for the man they both love.



THANK YEST

\$ 0.35	themuteR raso
\$ 2.65	this9 francomy.
00:00\$	(thought tibera)
00.0 \$	sam Anounts
8 2,85	through rest
20_2 \$ \$ 7muonA 66	Previous Fine/F
G2 08	FIME: 798982
27,08	FIME: 798983
05 ' 0\$	FIME: 90416
99'05	\$36819 [BN] a
62,08	61ME: 790516

RODDVVVVVVVVVVV 1975

S.S.F. Public Library
Grand Ave.
306 Walnut Ave.
South San Francisco, CA 94080

JAN 2011

DENCO



the host

ALSO BY STEPHENIE MEYER

Twilight

New Moon

Eclipse

the host

A NOVEL

STEPHENIE MEYER



NEW YORK SOSTON LONDON

Copyright © 2008 by Stephense Meyer

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group USA
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017
Vant our Web sur at uson Hachette Book Group USA com

First Edition, May 2008

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author

The author is grateful for permission to reprint the poem "Question" from Nature. Poems Old and New, by May Sweeten, Copyright © 1994 by The Literary Estate of May Sweeten. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Meyer, Stephence.

The host a novel / Stephenie Meyer. - 1st ed.

P CHI

ISBN 978-0-316-06804-8 (hc) / 978-0-316-02669-7 (International ed.) /

978-0-316-03691-7 (Scholastic ed.)

1 Spirit possession - Fiction. I Title

P\$3613.H979H67 2008

813'6 - dc22

2007033060

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

RED-IN

Book design by Meryl Sussman Levans

Printed in the United States of America

the host

To my mother, Candy, toho taught me that love is the best part of any story

QUESTION

Body my house my horse my hound what will I do when you are fallen

Where will I sleep How will I ride What will I hunt

Where can I go
without my mount
all eager and quick
How will I know
in thicket ahead
is danger or treasure
When Body my good
bright dog is dead

How will it be to lie in the sky without roof or door and wind for an eye

with cloud for a shift how will I hide?

Inserted

he Healer's lame was Fords Deep Waters.

Because he was a soul, by nature he was all things good compassionate, patient honest virtuous, and full of love. Anx ety was an anusual emotion for Fords Deep Waters.

Irritation was even caren However because Fords Deep Waters lived inside a human body, irritation was sometimes nescapable

As the whispers of the Healing students ouzzed in the far corner of the operating room, his lips pressed together into a light line. The expression is a out of place on a mouth more often given to smiling.

Darren his regiliar assistant, saw the grimace and patted his shoulder

"They rejust curious. Fords" he said quietly

"An insertion is harmy an interesting or challenging procedure.

Any soul on the street could perform it in an emergency. There's northing for them to learn by observing today." Fords was surprised to hear the sharp edge marring his normally soothing voice.

"They ve never seen a grown human before." Darren said.

Fords raised one eyebrow. "Are they biind to each other's faces?"

Do they not have mirrors?"

"To know what I mean a will human St. soil ess. One of the insurgents."

Fords are ked at the garl's unconscious body laid our facedown on the operating table. Pity swelled in his heart as he remembered the condition her poor broken body had been in when the Seckers had brought her to the Healing facility. Such pain she diendured

Of course she was perfect now — completely healed. Forus had seen to that

"She looks the same as any of us." Fords murmured to Darren "We all have human faces. And when she wakes up, she will be one of us, too."

"It's just exciting for them, that's all."

"The soul we implant today descrives more respect than to have her host body gawked at this way. She II already have far too much to deal with as she acclimates. It should not her brough this." By this, he did not mean the gawking. Fords heard, he sharp edge return to his voice.

Darren patted him again. "It will be time The Seeker needs information and —"

At the word *Seeker*. Fords gave Darren a look that could not y be described as a glare. Darren binked in shock

I'm sorry." Fords applogized at once. "I didn't mean to react so negatively. It's just that I fear for this soul."

His eyes moved to the chyotank on its stand beside the table. The light was a steady dull red, indicating that it was occupied and in his beroation mode.

"This soul was specially picked for the assignment." Darren said soothing y "She is exceptional among our kind" braver than most Her lives speak for themselves. I think she would volunteer if it were possible to ask her"

"Who among us would not volunteer if asked to do something for the greater good? But is that really the case here? Is the greater good served by this? The question is not her willingness, but what it is right to ask any soul to bear."

The Healing students were cascussing the hibernating soul as well

Fords could hear the whispers clearly, their voices were rising now getting ouder with their excitement

"She's lived on six planets."

"I heard seven."

"I heard she's never lived two terms as the same host species."

"Is that possible?"

"She's been almost everything. A Flower a Bear a Spider —"

"A See Weed, a Bat -- "

"Even a Dragon."

"I don't believe it - not seven planets,"

"At least seven. She started on the Origin."

"Really? The Origin?"

"Quiet, please." Fords interrupted. "If you cannot observe professionally and sciently, then I will have to ask you to remove your selves."

Abashed the six students fell silent and edged away from one another

"Let's get on with this, Darren."

Everything was prepared. The appropriate medicines were said out beside the human girl. Her long dark hair was secured beneath a surgical cap, exposing her siender neck. Deeply sedated, she breathed showly in and but. Her sun-brow ieu skin had barely a mark to show for her ... accident

"Begin that sequence now please Darren"

The gray haired assistant was already waiting beside the cryotans, in a hand resting on the dual. He flipped the safety back and spun down on the dial. The red light atop the small gray cylinder began to pulse, flashing faster as the seconds passed, changing color.

Fords concentrated or the unconstitute body the edged the scalpel through the sign at the base of the subjects skull with small precise movements, and then sprayed on the medication that striked the excess flow of blood before he widened the fissure. Fords delved descately beneath the neck muscles, careful not to injure them, exposing the pale bones at the top of the spinal column.

"The sou is ready, Fords." Darren informed hun

"So am L Bring her,"

Fords test Darren at his e bow and knew without looking that his

assistant would be prepared his hand stretched out and waiting, they had worked together for many years now illords he alithe gap open

"Send her home," he whispered.

Darrens hand moved into view, the silver gleam of an awaking soul in his cupped palm,

Fords never saw an exposed soul without being struck by the beauty of it

The sour shone in the brill and lights of the operating room brighter than the reflective stiver instrument in his hand. Like a living ribbon she twisted and rippied stretching, happy to be free of the arvotang. Her thin feathery attachments nearly a thousand of them, bullowed softly like page silver hast. Though they were a clovely this one seemed particularly graceful to Forus Deep Waters.

He was not alone in his reaction. He heard Darren's soft sigh, heard the admiring marmars of the students

Genta. Darren places the small plastening creature inside the opening Fords had made to the human's neck. The soulist a smoothly nto the offered space, weaving herself into the alien anatomy. Fords admired the skill with which she possessed her new home. Her at tachments wound tightly into place around the nerve centers, some congating and teaching deeper in where he couldn't see under and up into the brain, the optic nerves, the ear canals. She was very quick very firm in her movements. Soon, only one small segment of her glistening body was visible.

"We adone" he with specied to her knowing that she could not bear him. The human girl was the one with ears, and she still sept soundly

It was a for time matter to finish the job the organed and healed the wound applied the salve that sealed the incision closed behind the scall and then brushed the sear softening powder across the line reft on her neck

"Perfect as usua." said the assistant, who, for some reason untark omable to Forus, had never made a change from his numan hosts name, Darren.

Forus sight a "I regret this dails work"

"You're only doing your duty as a Hesier"

"This is the rare occasion when Healing creates an injury"

Darren began to clean up the workstation. He didn't seem to know how to answer. Fords was filling his Calling. That was enough for Darren.

But not enough for Fords Deep Waters, who was a true Healer to the core of his being. He gazed anxiously at the human female's body pealeful in slamber knowing that this peace would be shattered as soon as she awoke. All the horror of this young woman's end would be borne by the innocent soul he'd just piaced inside her

As he leaned over the human and whispered in her ear. Fords wished fervently that the soul inside could hear him now.

"Good lack little wanderer good lack Flow I wish you dien't need it."

Remembered

knew it would begin with the end, and the end would look like death to these eyes. I had been warned

Not there eyes. My eyes. Mine. This was me now

The language I found myself using was odd, but it made sense Choppy boxy bland, and linear Impossibly or pased in comparison to many I a used yet stol it managed to find fluidity and expression. Sometimes begint My language now My native tongue.

With the truest instance of my kind. I'd bound myse if securely into the body's center of thought, twined myself thescapably into its every breath and realex until it was no longer a separate entity. It was me

Not the body, my body.

I telt the sedation wearing off and locidity taking its place. I orneed it yeelf for the onslaught of the first memory, which would really be the last memory—the last moments it is body had experienced the memory of the end. I had been warned thoroughly of what would happen now. These hyman emotions would be stronger more yita, than

the fee ings of any other species I had been. I had tried to prepare myself.

The memory came. And, as I'd been warned, it was not something that could ever be prepared for

It seared with sharp color and ringing sound. Cold on her skin, pain gripping her limbs, burning them. The taste was flercely metallic to her mouth. And there was the new sense, the fifth sense I'd never had that took the particles from the air and transformed them into strange messages and pleasures and warnings in her brain—scents. They were distracting, confusing to me, but not to her memory. The memory had no time for the nove ties of smell. The memory was only fear.

Fear locked her in a visc goading the bount clumsy limbs forward but hampering them at the same time. To flee to run — it was all she could do

I've failed.

The memory that was not mine was so frighteningly strong and clear that it sided through my control—overwhelmed the detachment the knowledge that this was just a memory and not me bucked into the hell that was the last minute of her life. I was she, and we were running

It's so dark ill can't see ill can't see the floor ill can't see my hands stretched out in front of me in in blind and try to hear the pursuit I can teel behind me but the pulse is so loud behind my ears it drowns everything else out.

tis cold it shouldn't matter now, but it hurts i'm so cold

The air in her nose was uncomfortable Bad. A oad sme,! For one second, that discomfort polied me free of the memory. But it was only a second, and then I was dragged in again, and my eves filled with horrified tears.

I'm lost, we're lost, it's over

They re right behind me now, loud and close. There are so many footsteps: I am alone, I've failed The Seekers are calling. The sound of their voices twists my stomach in going to be sick.

"It's fine it's fine" one lies, trying io caim me to slow me. Her voice is disturbed by the effort of her breathing.

"Be carefull" another shouts in warning

"Don't hurt you self," one at them pleads. A deep voice full of concern. Concern!

Heat shot through my veins, and a violent hatred nearly choked me

I had never fell such an emotion as this in all my lives. For another second my revulsion put ed me away from the memory. A high, shir keening pierced my ears and putsed in my head. The sound scraped through my a rways. There was a weak pain in my throat.

Screaming my body explained You're screaming

I froze in shock, and the sound broke off abrilptly

This was not a memory.

My body she was thinking! Speaking to me!

But the memory was stronger in that monien, than my astonishment

"Please" they cry "There is danger ahead!"

The danger is behind:—scream back in my mind. But—see what they mean A reebie stream of light, coming from who knows where shines on the end of the hai. It is not the flat wall or the locked door the dead end feared and expected, it is a black hole.

An elevator shaft. Abandoned, empty, and condemned, like this building. Once a hiding place, now a tomb

A surge of relief floods through me as lince forward. There is a way No way to survive, but perhaps a way to with

No. 110, 110. This thought was all mine and I fought to pi i myself away from her but we were together. And we sprinted for the edge of death

"Please!" The shouts are more desperate

fee ke laughing when know that am last enough imagine their

hands clutching for me just inches behind my back. Bill it am as fast as tineed to be ill don't even pause at the end of the floor. The hole rises up to meet me midstride.

The emptiness swallows me. My legs flait, useless. My hands grip the air claw through it, searching for anything solid. Cold blows past me. ike tomado winds.

hear the thud before teer to The wind is gone.

And then pain is everywhere. Pain is everything.

Make it stop.

Not high enough, whisper to myself through the pain.

When will the pain end? When .?

The blackness swanowed up the agony and I was weak with gratitude that the memory had come to this most final of conclusions. The blackness took all, and I was tree. I took a breath to steady myself, as was this body's habit, My body.

But then the color rushed back, the memory regred up and engulfed me again.

No. I panicked fearing the coud and the pain and the very tear teelf.

But this was not the same memory. This was a memory within a memory a final incinory, ke a last gasp of air vet somehow even stronger than the first.

The blackness took all but this a face.

The face was as a sen to me as the faceless serpentine tentacles of my tast host body would be to this new body. I'd seen this kind or face in the images I had been given to prepare for this world. It was hard to tell them apart, to see the tiny variations in color and shape that were the only markers of the individual. So much the same all of them. Noses centered in the middle of the sphere eyes above and mouths be ow ears around the sides. A collection of senses, all but touch, concentrated in one place. Skin over bones, hair growing on the crown and in strange furry lines above the eyes. Some had more fur ower down on the jaw those were always makes. The colors ranged through the brown searcifrom pale cream to a deep almost black. Aside from that, how to know one from the other?

This face I would have known among this ons.

This face was a hard rectangle, the shape of the bones strong under the skin. In cotor it was a light golden brown. The hair was just a few shades darker than the skin, except where flaxen streaks ligh ened it and it covered only the head and the odd for stripes above the eyes. The circular insess in the white eyebalis were darker than the hair but, like the hair flecked with light. There were small lines around the eyes, and her memories told me the lines were from smiling and squanting into surnight.

I knew nothing of what passed for beauty among these strangers and yet I knew that this face was beautiful I wanted to keep looking at it. As soon as I realized this, it disappeared

Mine spoke the alien thought that should not have existed.

Again. I was frozen, stummed. There should have been no one here but me. And ye. this thought was so strong and so aware.

Impossible. How was she still here? This was me now

Mine I rebt ked her the power and authority that belonged to me a one flowing through the word. Everyoning is more

So why am I talking buck to here I wondered as the voices interrupted my thoughts.

Overheard

he voices were soft and close and, though I was only now aware of them, apparently in the middle of a marmured conversation.

"I'm atraid it is too much for her "line said. The voice was soft but deep, male. "Too much for anyone. Such violence." The tone spoke of revulsion

"She screamed only once" said a higher reedy, female voice pointing this out with a hint of give as if she were winning an argument.

"I know" the man admitted "She is very strong. Others have had much more trauma, with much iess cause."

"I'm sure she ll be fine usr as I tood you."

"Maybe you missed your Cailing." There was an edge to the man's voice. Sarcasm, my memory named it. "Perhaps you were meant to be a Healer, like me."

The women made a sound of amusement. Laughter "I doubt that We Seekers prefer a different surt of diagnosis."

My body knew this word this time *Seeker*. It sent a shudder of tear down my spine. A leftover reaction. Of course, I had no reason to tear Seekers.

"I sometimes wonder if the infection of himanity fouches hose in your profession," the man mused, his voice still sour with annovance. "Violence is part of your life choice. Does enough of your body's native temperament linger to give you enjoyment of the horror."

I was surprised at his accusation, at his tone. This discussion was almost like—an argument. Something my host was familiar with but that I dinever experienced.

The woman was detensive "We us not choose violence. We take it when we must. And it is a good thing for the rest of you that some of us are strong enough for the unpleasantness. Your peace would be shattered without our work."

"Once apon a time. Your vocation will soon be obsulete. I think "

"The error of that statement lies on the bed there "

"One human girl alone and unarmed. Yes quite a threat to our peace."

The woman breathed out heavily. A sigh, "But where did she come from? How did she appear in the middle of Chicago, a city long since civil zed. hundreds of miles from any trace of rebel activity? Did she manage it stone?"

She i sted the questions without seeming to seek an answer, as if she had already voiced them many times

"That's your problem not mine" the man said. "My job is to help this soul adapt herself to her new host without unnecessary pain or trauma. And you are here to inter ere with my job."

Star slowly surfacing acclimating myscif to this new world of senses, I understood only now that I was the subject of the conversation. I was the soul they spoke of It was a new connotation to the world a world that had mean, many other things to my host. On every planet we took a different haine. Soul I suppose it was an apt description. The unseen force that guides the body.

"The answers to my questions mat et as much as your respons. bi thes to the soul."

"That's debatable."

There was the sound of movement, and her voice was suddenly a whisper. "When will she become responsive? The sedation must be about to wear off."

"When she's ready. Leave her be. She deserves to handle the situation however she finds most confortable. Imagine the shock of her awakening this time a tobe thost injured to the point of death in the escape attempt? No one should have to endure such trauma in times of peace." His voice rose with the increase of emotion

"She is strong." The woman's tone was reassuring now. "See how well she did with the first memory, the worst memory. Whatever she expected, the handled this."

"Why should she have to?" the man muttered, but he didn't seem to expect an answer.

The woman answered anyway. "If we're to get the information we need."

"Need being your word. I would choose the term tount."

"Then someone must take on the unpleasantness" she continued as if he had not interrupted "And I think from a. I know of this one, she would accept the challenge if there had been any way to ask her What do you call her?"

The man diant speak for a long moment. The woman waited "Wanderer" he finally and unwill ngly answered

"Fitting," she said "I don't have any official statistics, but she has to be one of the very few of not the only one who has wandered so far Yes, Wahatter will so I her well anti-she chooses a new name for herself."

He said nothing.

"Of course she may assume the bosts name. We found no matches on record for the finger prints or retinal scan. I can't tell you what that name was "

"She won't take the human name" the man muttered.

Her response was a nechatory. "Everyone finds comfort their own way."

"This Wanderer w... need more comfort than most thanks to your style of Scening."

There were sharp sounds tootsteps staccato against a hard

floor. When she spoke again, the woman's voice was across the room from the man.

"You would have reacted poorly to the early days of this occupation," she said.

"Perhaps you react poorly to peace"

The woman laughed but the sound was false in there was no real amusement. My mind seemed well adapted to inferring the true meanings from tones and inflections.

"You do not have a clear perception of what my Calling entails. Long hours hunched over files and maps. Mostly desk work. Not very often the conflict or violence you seem to think it is."

"Ten days ago you were armed with killing weapons, running this body down."

"The exception, I assure you not their the Do not forget the weapons than disgust you are turned on our kind wherever we Seekers have not been vigilant enough. The humans kill us happily whenever they have the ability to its or. Those whose lives have been touched by the hostility see us as heroes."

"You speak as if a war were raging"

"To the remains of the ht man race, one is "

These words were strong in my ears. My body reacted to them, I felt my breathing speed, heard die sound of my heart pumping louder than was usual. Beside the bed I lay on a machine registered the increases with a muteu beeping. The Healer and the Seeker were loo abvolved in their disagreement to notice.

"But one that even they must realize is long lost. They are outnumbered by what? A million to one? I imagine you would know "

"We estimate the odds are quite a bruhigher in our favor" sheladmitted grudging.v.

The Heater appeared to be content to let his side of the disagred ment rest with that information. It was quiet for a moment

I used the empty time to evaluate my situation. Much was obvious. I was in a Healing facility recovering from an unusually trad-

matic insertion. I was sure the body that hosted me had been fully healed before it was given to me. A camaged host would have been disposed of

I considered the conflicting opinions of the Healer and the Seeker According to the information I had been given before making the choice to come here—he Healer had the mahalof it. Hostilities with the few remaining prockets of humans were all our over. The plane called Earth was as peaced and serene as it looked from space invitingly green and base wreathed in its harmless with revapors. As was the way of the soull harmony was universal new.

The verbal a ssens or between the Healer and the Seeker was out of character. Strangely aggressive for our kind. It made me wonder Could hey be true, the whispered rumors that had and lated like waves through the thoughts of the lot the

I was distracted trying to find the name for my last hist species. We disad a name I knew that But no imper connected to that host I could not remember the word. We diused much simpler anguage than this a such language of thought that connected us a linto one great mind. A necessary convenience when one was noted to ever into the wet black soil.

I could describe that species in my new hi man language. We lived on the floor of the great ocean that covered the enline surface of our world—a world that had a name, too, but that was also gone. We each had a hundred arms and on each arm a thousand eyes, so that, with our thoughts connected, not one sight in the vast waters went unseen. There was no need for sound so here was no way to hear it. We tasted he waters and with our sight that told us all we needed to know. We tasted the sight so thank leagues above the water and turned their taste into the food we needed.

I could describe us, but I could not name us. I sighed for the lost knowledge and then retirined my ponderings to what I dioverheard

Not is did not as a rule speck any bing but the truth Neckers of course had the requirements of their Calling but between soils there was never reason for a lie. With my last species, anguage of thought, it would have been impossible to be even had we wan each. However anchored as we were we told of rise ves stories to a leviate the nore-upon. Norytelling was the most honored of a talents, for it henchted everyone.

Sometimes, fact mixely with fiction so thoroughly that though not less work took it was hard to remember what was sir city true.

When we thought of the new planet. Earth so are so varied, and theo with such vicient destructive denizers we could parely magnethem. Our horror was sometimes avershadowed by our excrement. Stories spill themselves quickly around the thrilling new subject. The wars ill wars our kind having to fight — were first reported accurately and then embeliabled and flet onalized. When the stories could sted with the affectal information I sought out. I nature is begieved the first reports.

But there were whispers of this of himan hosts so strong that the souls were forced to abandon them. His six nose minds could not be completely suppressed. Souls who took on the personality of the body rather aban the other way around. Stories, Wild manors, Madness.

But that see ned almost to be the Hewer's accusuation

I dism seed the thought. The mare likely meaning of his censure was the distaste most of as lett of the Seekers Calling Who would choose a life of could of and purs in Who would be attracted to be chore of tracking down one ling hosts and capturing them? Who would have he stomach to face the violence of his particle at species the host ie humans who killed so easily so thought essive Here on his planet, the Seekers had become practically a limit my new brain supplied the term for the unfamiliar concept. Most be ieved fat only the least on lizes son's the least evolved the assertations.

Still on Earth the Seekers had gained new status. Never be ore had an occupation gone so away. Never before had it is rised in stathcree and bisporty battle. Never before had the lives of so many souls been sacrificed. The Seekers stood as a nighty shield, and the souls of a work were thrice-over indebted to them for the safety they had carved out on the maybem for the risk of the area cearly that they faced with night every day, and for the new bodies they continued to provide.

Now that the danger was virtually pas it appeared the gratition was the ng. And for this becker at east the change was not a pleasant one.

It was easy to magine what her questions for me would be. Though the Healer was try grabbin me time to ad usi to my new hold, I know I would do my best to help the Sceker. Good citizenship was quintessential to every soul.

So I took a deep breath to prepare mysclif. The monitor registered the movement. I knew I was stalling a but I hated to admit it, but I was about I to get the information the Seeker needed. I would have to expore the violent memories that had made me scream in horror. More than that, I was atraid of the voice I'd heard so loudly in my head. But she was silent now as was righ. She was just a memory too.

I should not have been afraid. After a l. I was called Wanderet now And I'd earned the name.

With another deep breath, I de ved into the memories that it ght ened me, faced them head on with my teeth locked together.

I could skip post the end into dank overwhelm the now in fast forward. I ran through the dark again, wincing trying not to tee. It was over quickly.

Once I was through that barrier, it wasn't hard to float through less alarming things and places, skimming for the information I wanted I saw hi wishe dicome to this cold city, driving by night in a stolen car chosen for its non-lescript appearance. She'd walked through the streets of Chicago in darkness, shavering beneath her coat

She was doing her own seeking. There were others like her here or so she hoped. One in particular A friend no, tamin. Not a sister... a cousin

The words came slower and slower and at first I did not under stand way. Was this forgotten? Lost in the trauma of an almost death? Was I still slugg shiften unconsciousness? I struggled to think clearly. This sensation was untamiliar. Was my body still sedate in I tell a ert enough but my mind abored unsuccessfully for the answers I wanted.

I tried another avenue of searching, hoping for dearer responses. What was her goal? She would find Sharon I fished out the name — and they would.

I bit a wall

It was a blank, a nothing. I tried to circle around it but I couldn't find the edges of the void. It was as if the information I sought had been erased.

As if this brain had been damaged.

Anger flashed through me hat and wild I gasped in surprise at the unexpected reaction. I diheard of the emotional instability of these has an bodies, but this was beyond my ability to anticipate. In eight full lives, I dinever has an emotion touch me with such force.

I felt the around purse through my neck, pounding behind my ears. My hands tightened into fists.

The much ness beside me reported the acceleration of my heart bests. There was a reaction in the room, the sharp tap of the Seeker's shoes approached me, in righed with a quieter shaffle that must have been the Healer.

"Welcome to Earth. Wanderer" he temale voice said.

Resisted

he won't recognize the new name " the Heater marmured.

A new sensation distracted me Something pleasant, a change in the air as the Seeker stood at my side. A scent, I realized Something different than the sterue, odorless room. Perfume my new mind told me. Floral, lush.

"Can you bear mer" the Seeker asked, interrupting my analysis, "Are you aware?"

"Take your time." the Healer urged in a softer voice than the one he had used before

I did not open my eyes. I didn't want to be distracted. My minugave me the words a needed, and the tune that would convey what I couldn't say without using many words.

"Have I been placed in a damaged bost in order to gain the information you need, Seeker?"

There was a gasp — surprise and outrage mingled — and some thing warm touched my skin, covered my hand

"Of course not, Wanderer" the man said reassuringly "Even a Seeker would stop at some things."

The Seeker gasped again. Hi ssed, my memory corrected

"Then why doesn't this mind function correctly?"

There was a pause.

"The scans were perfect," the Scener said. Her words not reassuring but argumentative. Did she mean to quarre, with mer "The body was entirely healed,"

"From a suicide attempt that was peruously close to succeeding." My tone was at if st. I angry. I wasn't used to anget. It was hard to contain it

"Everything was in perfect order -"

The Heater cut her off "What is missing?" he asked. "Clearly, you've accessed speech."

"Memory I was trying to find what the Seeker wants."

The Seeker cleared her throat, but it was the Healer who an swered.

"Ah." he said "Don't make yourself anxious about some partial memory—difficulties. That's, well not to be expected, exactly but not surprising, considering."

"I don't understand your meaning."

"This host was part of the human resistance." There was a hint of exchement in the Secker's voice now. Those humans who were aware of us before insertion are more difficult to subdue. This one still resists."

There was a moment of science while they waited for my response Resisting? The host was blocking my access? Again, the heat of my anger surprised me

"Am I correctly bound?" I asked my voice distorted become to came through my teeth.

"Yes," the Healer said. "All eight hundred twenty seven points are latched securely in the optimum positions."

This mind sed more of my faculties than any host before leaving me only one bundred eighty one spare attachments. Perhaps the numberous bindings were the reason the emotions were so vivid.

I decreed to open my eyes. I telt the need to double-check the Heater's promises and make sure the rest of me worked.

Light Bright point is I closed my eyes again. The last light I had seen had been to rered through a number ocean fathoms. But these eyes had seen brighter and cold dihancle. I opened them narrowly keeping my cyclashes feathered over the breach.

"Would you like me to turn down the "ghts?"

"No, Healer My eyes will adjust."

"Very good " he said, and I understood hat his approval was meant for my casual use of the possessive

Both waited quietly while my eyes slowly widefield

My mand recognized this as an average room in a medical factory. A hospital The certing files were white with darker speciales. The lights were rectangular and the same size as the tries, replacing them at regular intervals. The walls were hight green — a calming color by traison he color of sickness. A poor choice, in my quickly formed opinion

The people facing me were more interesting than the room. The word distinct sounded in my miles as soon as my eyes tastened on the Healer. He word toose fitting blue green clothes that left his arms bare. Scrubs, He had hair on his face, a strange color that my memory called red.

Red. It has been three worlds since I has seen the color or any of its relatives. Even this gangery gold billed me with nostaig a.

His face was gener cally human to me, but the knowledge in my memory appared the word kind

An imparient breath pailed my attention to the Secker

She was very small It she had remained still it would have taken me longer to notice her there beside the Healer. She didn't araw the eye a darkness in the bright room. She were black from than to wis sill a conservative suit with a sills furthereck. Inderneuth, Her-

hair was black too it grew to her thin and was pushed back behind ber ears. Her skin was darker than the Heater's. Ouve toned

The tiny changes in hi mans, expressions were so minimal they were very hard to read. My memory could name the look on this wom and face, though. The black brows, stanted down over the slightly bailenges eyes created a familiar design. Not quite anger. Intensity Ir ritation.

"How often does this happen?" I asked looking at the Hesier again.

"Not often" the Heater admitted. "We have so few full grown hosts available anymore. The immature hosts are entirely pliable. But you indicated that you preferred to begin as an adult..."

"Yes."

"Most requests are the opposite. The human life span is much shorter than you're used to."

"I'm well versed in all the facts. Healer Have you deat with this , . , resistance before yourse.f?"

"Only once, myself."

"Te., me the facts of the case." I paused. "Please." I added fee ing a lack of courtesy in my command.

The Healer signed.

The Seeker began tapping her fingers against her arm. A sign of impatience. She did not care to wast for what she wanted.

"This occurred four years ago," the Healer began. "The soul involved had requested an adult male bost. The first one to be available was a human who had been a ving in a pocket of resistance since the early years of the occupation. The human is knew what would happen when he was exught."

"Just as my host did."

"Lm ves." He cleared his throat. "This was only the soul's second life. He came from Blind World."

"Bling World" Lasket, cocking my head to the side reflexively

"Ch, sorry you wouldn't know out micknames. This was one of yours, though, was it not?" He pulled a device from his pocket, a computer and scanned quickly. "Yes your seventh planet. In the eighty first sector."

"Band World" I said again my voice now d sapproving

"Yes, we," some who have lived there prefer to call it the Singing World."

I nodded slowly, I tiked that better

"And some who we never been there call it Planet of the Bats." the Seeker muttered

It med my eyes to her leeling them narrow as my mind dredged up the appropriate image of the light flying rodent she referred to

"I assume you are one who has never lived there Seeker" the Hewer's all ghtly "We called this sou. Racing Song at hist in the was a loose translation of his had not on the Suging World But he soon opted to take the name of his host. Kevan Though he was slated for a Calling in Musical Performance, given his background he said he feit more comfortable continuing in the host's previous like of work, which was mechanical.

"These signs were somewhat worr some to his assigned Comforcer but they were well within normal bounds.

"Then Kevin started to compain that he was blacking out for periods of time. They brought him back to me and we ran extensive tests to make sure, here was no hidden flaw in the host's brain. During the testing, several Heaters noted marked differences in his behavior and personality. When we questioned him about this, he claimed to have no memory of certain statements and actions. We continued to observe him along with his Comforter at deventually discovered that the host was periodically taking control of Kevin's body."

"Taking control?" My eyes strained wide: "With the soul unaware? The host took the body back?"

"Sadly ves. Kevin was not strong enough to suppress this host."

Not strong enough

Would they think he weak as well. Was I weak, that I could not torce this mind to answer my questioned Weaker stail because her living thoughts had existed in my head where there should be nothing but memory? I'd always thought of myself as strong. This dea of weakness made me flinch. Made me fice, shame

The Healer commuted "Certain events occurred and it was decided —"

"What events?"

The Hesier looked down without answering

"What eventse" I demanded again. "I believe I have a right to know."

The Heater sighed "You do Kevin — physically attacked a Heater while not — it mostle." He winced "He knocked the Heater unconscious with a blow from his fist and then found a scalpe, on her person. We found thim insensible. The host had tried to cut the soul out of his body."

It took me a moment before I could speak. Even then imy voice was ust a breath. "What happened to them?"

"Luckely the host was unable to stay conscious long enough to in flict real of mage. Kevin was relocated into an immature host this time. The troublesome host was in poor repair, and it was decided there wasn't much point in saving him.

"Why?" I deared my throat so that my voice could gain some voame. "Why have these risks not been shared?"

"Actually" the Seeker broke in "it is very deany stated in all recruitment propaganda that assimilating the remaining adult burnan bosts is much more challenging than assimilating a child. An immature host is highly recommended."

"The word chanenging does not quite cover Key, a story." I whispered.

"Yes, well one preferred to gnote the recommendation." She held up her har do in a peacemaking gesture when my body tensed causing the statistic on the narrow bed to crackle softly. "Not at I have you. Childhood is extraordinar or tedious. And you are clearly not the average soul. I have every confidence that this is well within your aborties to handle. Thus is just another host. I'm sure you we have full access and control shortly."

By this peror in my observations of the Seeker, I was surprised that

she dihad he patience to wait for any delay even my personal accilmate it zation. I sensed her disappointment in my lack of information and to brought back some of the unfamiliar feelings of anger.

"Did it not occur to you that you could get the answers you seek by being inserted into this body yourself?" I asked

She stiffened. "I'm no skapper."

My eyebrows pulled up au omatically

"Another nickname" the Healer exp whed "For those who do not complete a life term in their host."

I nodded in understanding. We u had a name for it on my other worlds. On no world was it smiled upon No I quit quizzing the Necker and gave her what I could

"Her name was Melante Stryder Sne was born in Albuquerque New Mexico. She was in Los Angeles when the occupation became known to her, and she hid in the wilderness for a few years before finding. Himmin Sorry I'll try that one again later. The body has seen twenty years. She drove to Chicago from. "I shook my head. "There were several stages not all of them alone. The vehicle was storen. She was searching for a cousin named Sharon, whom she had reason to hope was still himan. She he ther found nor contailed any one before she was spotted. But "I striggled highling agains, an other blank was. "I think I can't be sure. I think she left a note... somewhere."

"So she expected someone would look for her?" the Seeker asked eagerly.

"Yes Show the missed If she does no rendezvous with "I gritted my teeth truly fighting now. The wall was black and I could not all how thick it was. I battered against it sweat beading on my forchead. The Scoker and the Healer were very quiet, allowing me to concentrate.

I tried thinking of some bing else—the ious, at familiar noises the englie of the car had made the littery rush of autenaline every time the lights of another vehicle drew near on the toad. I already had this, and nothing fought me il let the memory carry me along liet it skip over the cold have through the city under the sheltering darkness of night, let it wind its way to the building where they ditound me

Not me, her. My body shuddered.

"Don coverextend —" the Hea er began

The Seeker shushed hom

I let my mind awell on the horror of discovery the harning hatred of the Seekers that overpowered almost everything else. The hatred was evil it was pain. I could hardly bear to feel it. But I let it run its course, hoping it would distract the resistance weaken the detections.

I watched caret my as she tried to hide and then knew she could not. A note scratched on a piece of debris with a broken pencil. Shoved hastiny under a door. Not just any door.

"The pattern is the fifth door along the fifth hall on the fifth floor. Her communication is there."

The Seeker had a small phone in her hand, she murmured rapidly into it.

"The hullding was supposed to be safe." I continued. "They knew tiwas concerned. She doesn't know how she was discovered. Did they find Sharon?"

A ch., of horror raised goose bumps on my arms

The question was not mine.

The question wasn't mine, but it flowed naturally through my a ps as if it were. The Seeker did not notice anything amiss.

"The coustn? No, they found no other human," she answered, and my body relaxed in response. "This host was sported en ering the building. Since the building was known to be condemned the crizen who observed her was concerned. He called us and we watched the building to see if we could catch more than one and then moved in when that seemed unlikely. Can you find the rendezvous point?"

I tried.

So many memories, an of them so colorful and sharp. I saw a hundred places. I'd never been, heard their names for the first time. A house in Los Angeles, lined with tall fronded trees. A meadow in a forest, with a tent and a fire, outside Winslow, Arizona. A deserted rocky beach it. Mexico. A cave, the entrance guarded by sheeting rain, somewhere in Oregon. Tents, buts, rude shelters. As time went on the names grow less specific. She did not know where she was, not did she care.

My name was now Wanderer yet her memories fit at last as well as my own. Except that my wandering was by choice. These flashes of

memory were a ways tanged with the tear of the hunted. Not wandering, but running

I tried not to feel pity. Instead, I worked to focus the memories. I didn't need to see where she id been, only where she was going. I sorted through the pictures that tied to the word Chicago, but none seemed to be anything more than fandom mages. I widened my net. What was outside Chicago. Cold. I thought. It was cold and there was some worry about that

Where I pushed, and the wall came back

I exhaled in a gust "Outside the city—in the wilderness—a state park, away from any habitations. It's not somewhere she'd been before, but she knew how to get there."

"How soon?" the Seeker asked

"Soon" The answer came at tomatical v. "How long have I been here?"

"We let the host heal for nine days, just to be absolutely sure she was recovered" the Healer told me "insertion was today the tenth day,"

Ten days. My body test a stagger ng wave of reach

"Too late," I said "For the rendezvous point or even the note." I could teel it much too strongly. The host was a most strong I allowed the words shought to be spoken, so that I could learn from them. "He won't be there."

"Her" The Scener paunced on the pronoun, "Wher"

The black was statistical down with more force than she dissed before. She was the timest fraction of a second too late.

Again the ace filled my mind. The heautiful face with the golden tan skin and the light flecked eyes. The face that stirred a strange, deep pleasure within me while I viewed it so clearly in my mind.

Though the wall slapped into place with an accompanying sensation of victous resentment it was not fast enough.

"lared." I answered. As quackly as if it had come from me, the thought that was not in he followed the name through my lips. "lared is safe."

Dreamed

t is too dark to be so not for maybe too hot to be so dark. One of the two is out of place.

crouch in the darkness behind the weak protection of a scrubby creosote bush is weating out all the water left in my body it is been filteen minutes since the car left the garage. No lights have come an. The arcadia door is open two inches, leiting the swamp cooler ability job. I can imagine the feel of the muist cool air browing through the screen. Wish it could feach me there.

My stomach guigles, and liclench my abdomina, muscles to stifle the sound it is quiet enough that the murmur carries.

нам 50 былдту

There is another need that is stronger—another hungry stomach hidden safely far away in the darkness, waiting alone in the rough cave that is our temporary home. A cramped place lagged with volcanic rock. What will be do discome back? All the pressure of motherhood with none of the knowledge or experience. Hee so hideously helpless Jamie is hungry.

There are no other houses close to this one the been watching since the sun was still white hot in the sky, and idon't think there is a dog, either

ease up from my capitch, my calves screaming in protest, but keep hunched at the waist if ying it, be smaller than the bush. The way up the wash is smooth sand, a pale pathway in the light or the stars. There are no sounds of cars on the road.

know what they will realize when they return the monsters who look like a nice couple in their early fittles. They will know exactly what larg, and the search will begin at once in end to be far away i really hope they are going outlionainigh on the lown 1 hinh its Friday. They keep our habits so perfectly, it's hard to see any difference. Which is how they won in the first place.

The fence around the yard is only waist high light over easily in his elessly. The yard is grave, though, and I have lip walk carefully to keep my weight from shifting it. I make it to the patio slab

The blinds are open. The startight is enough to see that the rooms are empty of movement. This couple goes for a spartan look, and imigrateful it makes it harder for someone to hide. Of course, that leaves no place for me to hide either builting to me at sitoo late anyway.

ease the screen door open first, and then the glass door Both glide silently—place my feet carefully on the file but this is just out of habit. No one is waiting for me here

The coor air feels like heaven.

The kitchen is to my left in can see the gleam of granite counters.

Pull the canvas bag from my shoulder and start with the retrigerator. There is a moment of anxiety as the light comes on when the door opens, but find the bullon and hold it down with my toe. My eyes ale bund illuon thave time to let them adjust ill go by fee).

Milk, cheese sices leftovers in a plastic bowl hope its the chicken and use thing watched him cooking for dinner. We'll ear this tonight

ance a bag of apples. Baby carrots. These will stay good in morning thatry to the pantry indeed things that will keep longer.

Lab see berter as lighter as much as ican carry Mimm, chocolate chip cookies. In diving to open the bag light now but 1 girl my teeth and gnore the twist of my empty stomach.

The paggets heavy too quickly. This will last us only a week, even it we're careful with it. And idon't feel like being careful, feel, ke gorging, shove granola bars into my pockets.

One more thing, I harry to the sink and refill my canteen. Then, put my head under the flow and gulp straigh, from the stream. The water makes odd tidises when it hits my hollow stornach.

start to feet panicked now that my lob is done I want to be out of here. Civilization is deadly

watch the floor on my way out, womed about tripping with my heavy bag, which is why 1 don't see the sill louetied black figure on the patic until my hand is on the door

hear his mumbled oath at the same time that a stupid squeak of fear escapes my mouth 1 spin to sprint for the front door hoping the locks are not tatched, or at least not difficult.

I don't even get two steps before rough, hard hands grab my shoulders and wrench me back against his body. Too big, too strong to be a woman. The bass voice proves me right

"One sound and you die" he threatens gruffly 1 am isnocked to feer a thin, sharp edge pushing into the skin under my jaw.

don't understand i sciouldn't be given a chaice. Who is this monster? I ve never heard of one who would break rules i answer the only way I can

"Do it," spit through my teeth "Just do it I don't want to be a fithy parasite!"

wall for the knie, and my heart is aching. Each beat has a name partie pamie, pamie. What will happen to you now?

"Ciever" the man mutters, and it doesn't sound like hels speaking to me "Must be a Seeker And that means a trap. How did they know?" The steel disappears from my throat, only to be replaced by a hand as hard as iron.

can barely breathe under his grip.

"Where are the rest of them?" he demands, squeezing,

"It's just me!" iraspilican't lead him to Jamie. What will Jamie do when I don't come back? Jamie is hungry!

throw my eibow into his gut—and this really horts. His stomach muscles are as fron hard as the hand. Which is very strange. Muscles, ike that are the product of hard, lying or obsession, and the parasiles have neither

He doesn't even suck in a breath at my blow. Desperate links my heel into his instep. This catches him offiguard, and he wobbles. I wrench away, but he grabs hold of my bag yanking me back into his body. His hand clamps down on my throat again.

"Feisity for a peace-loving body snatcher aren't you?"

His words are nonsensical a thought the aliens were at the same iguess. they have their nut jobs, too, after all

twist and claw trying to break his hold. My halls calch his arm, but this just makes him tighten his hold on my throat.

"I will kill you, you worthless body thief I'm not bluffing"

"Do d, then!"

Suddenly he gasps, and I wonder it any of my flatting limbs have made contact a don't feet any new bruises.

He lets go of my arm and grabs my hair. This most be if. He's going to cut my throat. Brace for the siice of the knife.

But the hand on my throat eases up, and then his lingers are tumbling on the back of my neck, rough and warm on my skin

"impossible," he breathes

Something hits the floor with a thud, He's dropped the knife? Itry to think of a way to get if. Maybe if I fall. The hand, on my neck isn't tight enough to keep me from yanking free. I think I heard where the biade landed.

He spins me around suddenly. There is a click, and light blinds my left eye. gasp and automatically try to twist away from it. His hand lightens in my hair. The light flickers to my right eye.

"I can't believe it," he whispers, "You re still human."

His hands grab my face from both sides, and before I can pull free, his lips come down hard on mine.

m trozer for half a second. No one has ever kissed me in my life. Not a real kiss Just my parents pecks on the cheek or forehead, so many years ago. This is something I thought, would never fee. I'm not sure exactly what I feels like, though. There's too much panic, too much remor, too much adrenaline.

jerk my knee up in a sharp thrust.

Held lokes out a wheezing sound, and I'm free instead of running for the front of the house again, like he expects, ilduck under his arm and leap through the open door it think ican out un him, even with my load, we got a head slart and hels still making pained hoises. I know where im going it wont leave a path he can see in the dark. Inever dropped the food, and that's good it think the granola bars are a loss, though

"Watti" he yelfs.

Shut up, think, but I don't yell back

Heis running after mells can hear his voice getting closer. "I'm not one of them!"

Sure keep my eyes on the sand and span. My dad used to say iran like a cheetah lives the fasiest on my track team, state champion, back before the end of the world.

"Listen to me!" He's still yelling at full volume. "Look. "Il prove it dust stop and look at me!"

Not likely pivot oil the wash and the through the mesquites.

"I didn't think there was anyone tet?! Please I need to talk to you."

His voice surprises me -- it is too close

"I'm sorry - kissed you. That was stupid, I've just been alone so long."

"Shut up!" I don't say it loudly, but I know he hears. He's getting even closer ('ve never been outrun before I push my legs harder

There's a low grunt to his breathing as he speeds up, too

Something big flies into my back, and I go down—taske dirt in my mouth and impinned by something so heavy—can hardly breathe

"Wait A. Minute," he huffs

He shifts his weight and rolls me over the straddles my chest, trapping my arms under his legs in ellis squishing my food. I growl and try to squirm out from under him

"Look look look" he says. He pulls a small cylinder from his hip pocket and twists the top. A beam of light shoots out the end.

He turns the flashlight on his face.

The light makes his skin yellow it shows prominent cheekbones beside a long thin nose and a sharply squared-off law. His lips are stretched into a grin, but can see that they are full, for a man. His eyebrows and lashes are bleached out from sun.

But that's not what he is showing me.

His eyes, clear liquid sienna in the illumination, shine with no more than human reflection. He bounces the light between left and right

"See? See? I'm just like you."

"Let me see your neck" Suspicion is shick in my voice it don liet myself believe that this is more than a trick it don't understand the poin of the characle but I'm sure there is one. There is no hope anymore.

His lips twis. "Well. That won't exactly help anything. Aren't the eyes enough? You know I'm not one of them."

"Why won't you show me your neck?"

"Because I have a scar there," he admits

try to squarm out from under him again, and his hand pins my shoulder.

"It's self-inflicted," he explains " think I did a pretty good job though it but like hell I don't have all that pretty hair to cover my neck. The scar helps me blend in "

"Get off me."

He hesitates, then gets to his feet in one easy move, not needing to use his hands. He holds one oull palm up, to me

"Please don't run away. And, um, id rather you didn kick me again, either"

don't move know he can catch melifitry to run

"Who are you?" I whisper

He smiles wide "My name is lared Howe haven't spoken to another human being in more than two years, so impure imput seem to a little crazy to you. Please forgive that and tell me your name anyway."

"Melanie," whisper.

"Meiarlie" he repeats. "I can't tell you how delighted i am to meet you."

I grip my bag lightly keeping my eves on him. He reaches his hand down toward me slowly.

And take it.

tilish tunit i see my hand our voluntarily around his that i realize believe him.

He helps me to my feet and doesn't refease my hand when I'm up.
"What now?" | ask guardedly

"Well we can stay here for long Will you come back with me to the house? Jeff my bag. You beat me to the fridge."

shake my head

He seems to realize how brittle lam, how close to breaking

"Will you wait for me here, then?" he asks in a gentle voice. "I'll be very quick, Let me get us some more food."

"Us?"

"Do you really think in going to let you disappear. If tollow you even if you tell me not to"

don't want to disappear from him

" How can a not trust another halman completely? We're family both

part of the brotherhood of extinction. "I don't have time." have so lar to go and chamte is waiting,"

"You're not alone," he realizes. His expression shows uncertainty for the first time.

"My brother He's just nine, and he's so frightened when I'm away it will take me half the night to get back to him. He won't know if I've been caught hie's so hungry." As if to make my point, my stomach growls loudly

uared's smile is back, brighter than be ore "Will it help if give you ande?"

"Ainde?" Lecho.

"If make you a dear You wait here while I gather more food and "I take you anywhere you want to go in my jeep it's faster than running even faster than you running."

"You have a car?"

"Of course. Do you think walked out here?"

think of the six hours it took me to walk here, and my forehead furnews.

"We'll be back to your brother in no time," he promises: "Don't move from this spot, okay?"

i nod.

"And eat something please don't want you, stomach to give us away" He grins, and his eyes clinicia up, fanning lines out of the corners. My heart gives one hard thump, and know will wait here if it takes him all hight

He is still holding my hand. He lets go slowly his eyes not leaving mine He takes a step backward, then pauses.

"Please don't kick me," he pleads, leaning forward and grabbing my chin He kisses me again and this time if feel it. His lips are softer than his hands, and hot, even in the warm desert night. A flock of butterflies nots in my stomach and steals my breath. My hands reach for him instinctively—touch the warm skin of his cheek, the rough hair on his neck. My fingers skim over a line of puckered skin, a raised odge right beneath the hair ine.

scream

I woke up covered in sweat. Even before I was an the way awake, my fingers were on the back of my neck, tracing the short and left from the insertion. I could barely detect the faint pink blemish with my fingertips. The medicines the Healer had used had done their job.

Jared's poorly healed scar had never been much of a disguise.

I flicked on the aight beside my hed waiting for my breathing to slow veins full of adrenaline from the realistic dream.

A new dream but in essence so much the same as the many others that had plagued me in the past mont is

No not a dream Surely a memory.

I could still feel the heat of Jareu's tips on mine. My hands reached out without my permission, searching across the rumpled sheet, looking for something, hey did not find. My heart ached when they gave up, falling to the bed limp and empty.

I blinked away the unwelcome moisture in my eyes 1 didn't know how mile hore of this I could stand. How did anyone survive this world with these bodies whose memories wouldn't stay in the past where they should? With these emotions that were so strong I couldn't tell what I feit anymore?

I was got up to be exhausted tomorrow but I follow that I know it would be hours before I could relax. I might as well do my duty and get it over with. Maybe it would help me take my mind off things I'd rather not think about.

I rolled off the bed and stumbled to the computer on the otherwise empty desk. It took a few seconds for the screen to glow to life, and another few seconds to open the mail program. It wasn't hard to find the Seeker's address. I only had four contacts, the Seeker, the Healer my new employer, and his wife, my Conforter.

There was another human with my host, Melanie Stryder

I typed, not bothering with a greeting

His name is Jamie Stryder, he is her brother

For a panicked moment, I wondered at her control. A this time and I dinever even guessed at the boy's existence into because he didn't matter to her but because she protected him more hercely than other secrets I'd unraveled. Did she have more secrets this hig, this important? So sacred that she kept them even from my dreams? Was

she that strong? My fingers trembled as I keyed the rest of the information.

think he's a young addressent now. Perhaps thirteen. They were living in a temporary camp, and it believe it was north of the town of Cave Creek, in Arizona. That was several years ago, though Still, you could compare a map to the mest remembered before. As always, I'll tell you if I get anything more.

I sent if off. As soon as it was gone, terror washed through me. Not Jamie!

Her voice in my head was as clear as my own spoken aloud. I studiered at horror

Even as I struggled with the fear of what was happening. I was gripped with the insane desire to e-mail the Seeker again and apologize for sending her my crazy dreams. To tell her I was half askeep and to pay no attention to the silly message I'd sent.

The desire was not my own.

I shut off the computer

I hate you the voice star ed in my head.

"Then may be you should leave," I snapped. The sound of my voice answering her aloud made me shudder again.

She hawn't spoken to me since the first moments I'd been here. There was no doubt that she was getting stronger, Just like the dreams.

And there was no quest on about it. I was going to have to visit my Comforter tomorrow. Tears of disappointment and hilm. attou welled in my eyes at the thought.

I went back to hed put a pinow over my face, and tried to the ik of nothing at all

Uncomforted

at home?"

I has tated on the threshold of the Comforter's office, one foot in and one foot out.

She smiled just a tary movement at the corners of her mouth. It was much easier to read facial expressions now the little must e twitches and shifts had become fair that through months of exposure. I could see that the Comforter found my rejuctance a bit amusing. At the same time, I could sense her trustration that I was still uneasy coming to her.

With a quie, sigh of resignation. I wanted into the small brightly colored room and auck my issue seat—the puffy red one, the one farthest from where she sat

Her lips pursed

In avoid her gaze I stared through the open windows at the clouds scuttling past the sun. The faint tangof ocean or he blew softly through the room.

"So, Wanderer It's been a while since you've come to see me."

I met her eyes gantary "I did leave a message about that last ap pointment. I had a student who requested some of my time."

"Yes. I know" She smaled the tiny ambe again. "I got your mes sage."

She was attractive for an older woman, as humans went. She dilet her hair stay a natural gray. It was soft tending loward white rather than silver and she wore it long pulled back in a loose pony tail. Her eyes were an interesting green color I dinever seen on any one else.

"I'm sorry," I said, since she seemed to be waiting for a response

"That's all right I understand It's difficult for you to come here You wish so much that it wasn't necessary. It's never been necessary for you before. This frightens you."

I stared down at the wooden floor "Yes Comforter"

"I know I ve asked you to call me Kathy."

"Yes .. Kathy."

She latighed ightly "You are not at ease with human names yet are you, Wanderer?"

"No. To be honest, it seems tike a surrender."

I looked up to see her nod slow v. "Weil, I can understand why you, especially would feel that way."

I swarlowed loudly when she said that, and stared again at the floor

"Let's talk about something easier for a moment." Kathy suggested "Do you continue to enjoy your Calling?"

"I do." This was easier "Two began a new semester. I won fered if it would get thresome, repeating the same material but so far it doesn't. Having new ears makes the stories new again."

"I hear good things about you from Curt. He says your class is among the most requested at the iniversity."

My cheeks warmed a bit at this praise. "That's nike to hear. How is your partner?"

"Curt is wonderful. Thank you. Our hosts are in excellent shape for their ages. We have many years ahead of us, I think "

I was curious if she would stay on this world if she would move to another human host when the time came, or if she would leave. But I

didn't want to ask any questions that might move us to the more difficult areas of discussion.

"I enjoy reaching." I said instead "It's somewhat related to my Caling with the See Weeds so that makes it easier than something untain har I'm indebred to Cart for requesting me."

"They reliackly to have you" Kashy smiled warmly. Do you know how rare a is for a Professor of Elistory to have experienced even two planets to the curriculture. Yet you've lived a term on almost all of them. And the Origin, to boot! There so that schoos on this planet that wouldn't ove to steal you away from its Carrippots ways to keep you busy so you have no time to consider moving."

"Honorary Professor" I corrected her

Kathy smalled and then look a deep breath, her smalled and "You haven, been to see me in so long I was wondering if your problems were resolving themselves. But then it recurred to me that perhaps the reason for your absence was that they were getting worse."

Is ared down at my hands and said nothing.

My hands were light brown a tan that never taded whether I spont time in the son of not. One dark freekle marked the skin just above my left wrist. My have were conshort. I district the feeling of one haves. They were unpleasant when they brushed the skin wrong. And not fingers were so long and thin the added length of higher have made them look strange. Even for a human

She cleared her throat after a minite. "I'm guessing my imunion was right."

"Kathy" I said her name slowly. Stalling, "Why did you keep your human name? Did it make you teel more at one? With your host I mean?" I would have I ked to know about Curt's choice as well but it wits such a personal question. It would have been wrong to ask any one besides Curt for the answer even his partner. I worried that I did a ready been too amposite, but she laughed.

"Heavens no. Wanderer Haven't I to divou this? Himm Maybe not a nee it's not no job to talk in it to listen. Most of the social apear with don't need as much encouragement as you do. Did you know I came to Earth in one of the very first placements, be one, he humans had any idea we were here? I had hi man neighbors on both sides. Curt an H had to pretend to be our hosts for several years. Even after

we disettled the immediate area you never knew when a human might be near 50 *Kmb*y just became who I was Besides the translation of thy former name was fourteen words long and did not shorten prefittly." She granned. The surright stanting through the window caught her eyes and sent their silver green reflection dancing on the wall. For a moment, the emera did uses glowed intersect.

I'd had not deathat this soft cory woman had been a part of the front line. It took me a minute to process that I stared at her surprised and suddenly more respectful. I'd never taken Comforters very senously — never had a need before now. They were for those who struggled for the weak, and it shamed me to be here. Knowing Kathy's history made me feet alightly less awk ward with her. She understood strength.

"Did it bother your" t asked "Pretending to be one of them?"

"No, not really You see this host was a lot to get used to there was so much that was new Sensory overload. Following the set partern was quite as much as I could handle at first."

"And Cart" You chose to stay with your nosis spouse. After a was over?"

This question was more pointed, and Kathy grasped that at once. She shifted in her seat, pulling her legs up and triding them under her. She gazed thoughtfully at a spot, list over my head as she answered.

"Yes, I chose Curt—and he chose me. At first of course it was toncom chance, an assignment. We bonded naturally from spending so much time together sharing the danger of our miss in. As the an versity's president. Curt had many con acis, you see. Our house was an inscrition facility. We would entertain often. Humans would come through our door and our kind would leave. It all had to be very quick and quiet—you know the violence these hosts are prone of Well ved every day with the knowledge that we could meet a final end at any moment. There was constant excitement and trequent fear.

"All very good reasons why Cart and I might have formed an attachment and decided to stay together when secrety was no longer necessary. And I could be to you assuage your tears, by realing you that these were the reasons. But I She shook her head and then

seemed to settle deeper into her chair, her eyes boring into me. "In so many millennia, the humans never did figure tope out. How much is physical how much in the mind? How much accident and how much fate? Why did perfect matches crumble and impossible couples thrive? I fon't know the answers any better than they did. Love simply is where it is. My host loved Curi's host, and that love did not die when the ownership of the minds changed."

She watched me carefully, reacting with a slight frown when I sumped in my seat

"Melanie s.i.l gricves for Jared," she stated

I feit my head nod without willing the action

"You grieve for him."

I closed my eyes.

"The dreams continue?"

"Every night," I mumbled

"Te me about them." Her voice was soft persuasive

"I don't like to think about them."

"I know Try It might help."

"How? How will it help to tell you that I see his face every time I close my eyes? That I wake up and cry when he shoot there? That the memories are so strong I can't separate hers from mine anymore?"

Ustopped abruptly clenching my teeth

Kathy pulled a white handkerch of from her pocket and offered it to me. When I didn't move, she got up, walked over to me, and dropped it in my, ap. She sat on the arm of my chair and waited.

I held on stubbornty for half a minute. Then I snatched the little square of faoric angril, and wiped my eyes.

"I hate this "

"Everybody cries their first year. These emotions are so impossible. We're all children for a oil, whether we intended that or not I used to tear up every time I saw a pretty sunset. The taste of peablit butter would sometimes do that, too." She patted the top of my head, then trailed her fingers gently through the lock of hair I always kept tacked behind my ear.

"Such pretty striny hair" she noted. "Every time I see you as shorter. Why do you keep it that way:"

Already in tears. I didn't feel like I had much dignity to defend

Why claim that it was easier to care for as I usually did. After al., I'd come here to contess and get help. I might as well get on with it.

"It bothers her. She likes it long "

She didn't gasp, as I half expected she would. Kathy was good at her job. Her response was only a second late and only slightly incoherent.

"You . She . . . she's still that . . present?"

The appaing truth lumbled from my lips. "When she wants to be Our history pores her She's more dormant while I'm working. But she's there all right Somer mes I fee like she's as present as I am " My voice was only a whisper by the time I was done."

"Wanderer" Kathy exclaimed, hornfied "Why didn't you tell me it was that bad? How long has it been this way?"

"It's getting worse. Instead of fading, she seems to be growing stronger. It's not as bad as the Healer's case yet — we spoke of Kevin do you remember? She hasn't taken control. She won't. I won't let that happen." The putch of my voice of mbed.

It took me a moment, emotionally distracted as I was to under stand

"A Heater? You want me to skip?"

"No one would in his badly of that choice, Wanderer It's under stood, if a host is defective —"

"Defective? She's not defective. I am I'm too weak for this world". My head to a into my hands as the fram lation washed through me Fresh tears welled in my eyes.

Kathy's arm settled around my shoulders. I was strugging so hard to comeo my wild emotions that I addr't pull away though it felt too intimate.

at bothered Melanic, too She d int ake being bugged by an alien.

Of course Melanie was very much present in this moment, and unbearably smug as I finally admitted to but power. She was gleeful. It was a ways harder to control her when I was distracted by emotion like this.

I tried to calm myself so that I would be able to put her in her piace

You are in my place. Her thought was faint but intelligible. How much worse it was getting, she was strong enough to speak to me now whenever she wished. It was as bad as that first minute of consciousness.

Go-away. It's my place now

Never

"Wanderer dear, no. You are not weak, and we both know that "

"Hmph."

"Listen to me. You are strong. Surprisingly strong. Our kind are always so much the same but you exceed the norm. You're so brave it astonishes me. Your past lives are a testament to that."

My past lives maybe out this Lifer Where was my strength now?

"But humans are more individualized than we are " Kathy went on "There's quite a range and some of them are much stronger than others. I truly believe that if anyone else had been put into this host. Melanie would have crushed them in days. Maybe it's an accident maybe it's fate, but it appears to me that the strongest of our kind is being hosted by the strongest of theirs."

"Doesn't say much for our kind does it?"

She heard the implication behind my words. "She's not winning, Wanderer. You are this lovely person beside me. She's just a shadow in the corner of your mind."

"She speaks to me. Kathy. She still thinks her own thoughts. She still keeps her secrets."

"But she doesn't speak for you does she? I doubt I would be able to say as much in your place."

I didn't respond. I was feeling too miserable

"I think you should consider reimplantation."

"Kathy, you just said that she would crush a different soul. I won't know it I believe that — you're probably ust trying to do your inbland comfortine. But I she is so strong it wouldn't he tair to hand her off to someone else because a can't subdue her. Who would you chnose to take her on?"

"I didn't say that to comfort you dear."

"Then what -- "

"I don't think this bost would be considered for rouse."
"Oh."

A shiver in horr in all eactown my spine. And I wasn't the only one who was staggered by the idea.

I was an neo atoly ripulsed. I was no quitter. Through the along revolutions around the solls of invitational planet. The world if the See Weeds as they were known here. I had waited. Though the permanence of being rooted began to wear long be one lidit hight it would though the lives of the See Weeds would measure in centimes on this planet. I had not skipped out in the life term of my host. To do so was wasteful wrong, it grateful. I in accept the very essence of who we were as souls. We made out work is better places, that was a solutely essential or we did not deserve them.

But we were not wasteful. We as I make whatever we took better more peacers, and beautiful. And the burnans were brut sh and ungovernable. They had a fled one another so trecken within marger had been an accepted part of the The various tortures they discovered over the ex-millenn a they dilasted had been too mach for me. I hadn't been able to bear even the dry official overviews. Wars had raged over the face of hearly every confinent. Sometic new more of deresians the out vielect le. Those who lived in peachful nations had rocked the other way as members of the rown's pecies starved on the t coorsier. There was no equally at the case, acion of the planets be piece is resoraces. Most viewe inhereoffst ring in the next general tion which my kind nearly wish preditor their promise. too often been victuals of he nous at mes. And not just at the rands of scrangers, but at the hands of the carefakers they were entristed to Exertisch gespherent hop and had been put in a expandy through their care essiand greedy in stakes. No one course compare what had bee and what was now and not acmit has Larth was a refer to ace thanks to us.

You microir an entire of a contract put market even to that a My hands balled up into fists.

Logan have some a posed of Leems med her. Go ahead. Make my murder official Oh, she thought she wanted to die. She dithrown herself into the elevator shaft latter all. But that was in a moment of panit and defeat. To consider it calmay from a comfortable chair was something else altogether. I could feel the adrenable — adrenable called into being by her fear — shoot through my limbs as I contemplated switching to a more plant body.

It would be nice to be alone again. To have my mind to myse to This world was very pleasant in so many novel wave, and it would be winderful to be able to appreciate it without the distractions of an angry displaced nonempty who should have had better sense than to linger unwanted this way.

Melante squarmed, figural vely in the recesses of my head as I tried to consider it rationally. Maybe I should give up

The words themse ves made me flinch I. Wan terer, give up? Quit? Admit fature and try again with a weak spineless host who wouldn't give me any trouble?

I shook my head. I could barely stand to think of it

And this was my body. I was used to the feel of it I liked the way the must es moved over the bones, the bend of the joints and the pull of the tendons. I knew the reflection in the mirror. The sun-browned skin the high, sharp bones of my face, the short silk cap of mithogany hair, the muchly green brown haze, of my eyes—this was me.

I wanted myse f. I wouldn't let what was mine be destroyed

Followed

the light was finally fading outside the windows. The day, not for March had langered on and on as if relaction to end and set me free.

I smilled and twis ed the wet handwerchiet into another knot "Kathy, you must have other obligations. Curt will be wondering where you are."

"He I understand."

"I can't stay here torever. And we're no closer to an answer than before."

"Quick fixes aren't my specialty. You are decided against a new host —"

"Yes."

"So Jealing with this will probably take some time."

I clenched my teeth in frustration

"And it will go taster and more smooth vilf you have some lielp."

"I I, so better with making my appointments. I promise "

"I" lat's not exactly what I mean though I hope you will."

"You mean help—other than you." I cringed at the toought of having to relive today's misery will a stranger. "I'm suce you're lost as qualified as any Comforter—more so."

"I definit mean another Comforter." She shifted her weight in the chair and stretched stiffly. "How many trichas do you have. Wan derer?"

"You mean people at work? I see a few other teachers almost every day. There are several students I speak to in the halls."

"Outside of the school?"

I stared at her blankly

"Human hosts need interaction. You're not used to so it, de idear. You shared an entire planet's thoughts —."

"We cadd go out much." My attempt at humor fe. flat

She smiled slightly and went on "You're struggling so hard with your problem that it's all you can concentrate on. Maybe one answer is to not concentrate quite so hard. You said Melanie grows bored during your working hours." That she is more dormant. Perhaps if you developed some peer relationships, those world hore her also."

I pursed my lips thoughtfully. Melanic, slugg shifton, he long day of attempted comfort, did seem rather unenthused by the idea.

Kathy nodded. "Get involved with life rather than with her."

"That makes sonse."

"And then there are the physical drives these boules have I ve never seen or heard of their equal One of the most difficult things we of the first wave had to conquer was the mating instinct. Be seve me the humans not ced when you don't." She granned and rolled her eyes at some memory. When I didn't react as she'd expected, she sighed and crossed her arms impatiently. "Oh come now, Wanderer Yimmust have noticed."

"Well, of course" I mumbled. Melanie stirred restlessly. "One ously I've told you about the dreams..."

"No. I aidn't mean hist memories. Haven't you come across anyone that your body has responded to in the present — on strictly a chemical level?"

I thought her question through carefully "I don't think so. Not so. I've noticed."

"I ast me " Kathy satu dryly "You a notice" She shook her head

"Perhaps you should open your eyes and look around for that specifically. It might do you a lot of good."

My body recorded from the thought. I registered Meranic's disgust mirrored by my own.

Kathy read my expression. "Don't let her control how you interact with your kind. Wanderer. Don't let her control you."

My nostris flared I waited a moment to answer reining in the anger that I'd never quite gotten used to

"She does not control me."

Kathy raised an eyebrow

The anger tightened my throat. "You'd dinot look too far and differ your current partner. Was that choice controlled?"

She gnored my anger and considered the question thoughtfully

"Perhaps." she finally said. "It's hard to know But you've made your point." She picked at a saring in the hem of her shirt, and then as if realizing that she was avoiding my gaze, folded her hands resolutely and squared her shoulders. "Who knows how might comes from any given host on any given planet? As I said before. I think time is probleably your answer. Whether she grows apathetic and shem gradually, a lowing you to make another choice besides this fared or well the Seekers are very good. They related to looking for him, and maybe you be remember something that helps."

I didn't move as her meaning sank in She didn seem to notice that I was frozen in place

"Perhaps they infine Me anies love and then you can be together. If his feelings are as fervent as hers, the new soul will probably be amenable."

"No "I wasn't sure who had shouted I, come have been me I was full of horror, too.

I was on my teet, slicking. The tears that came so easily were, for once absent and my hands trembled in tight fists.

"Wanderere"

But a turned and can tot the door fighting the words that could not come but of my more h. Words that could not be my words. Words that made no sense infess they were hers but they tell like mane. They couldn't be mine. They couldn't be mine. They

That's killing time. That, nearing time cease to no 1 wont want some

one esse I want Jareca not a same ger in his body. The body means nowhing without him

I heard Kathy calling my name behind me as I ran into the road

I didn't live far from the Comforter's office, but the darkness in the street disoriented me. I digone two blocks before I real zed I was running in the wrong direction.

People were looking at me I wasn't dressed for exercise and I wasn't jogging I was flee ag. But no one pothered me they politely averted their eyes. They would gitess that I was new to this host. Acting out the way a child would.

Is owed to a walk, turning north so that I could mop around with out passing Kathy's office again.

My walk was only slightly slower than a run. I heard my feet hatting the sidewilk too quickly, as though they were trying to match the tempo of a dance song. Slap, wap wap against the concrete. No it wasn't like a arumbeat it was too angry. I we violence. Stap. stap. stap. Someone is using someone else. I shuddered away from the horrible image.

I could see the lamp on over my apartment door. It hadn't taken me long to cover the distance. I widn't cross the road, though

I test sick. I remembered what it fest like so voinit, though I never had. The cold wetness dewed on my forehead, the human sound rang in my ears. I was prefly sure I was about to have that experience for my own.

There was a bank of grass beside the walk. Around a streetlamp there was a well-immed hedge. I had no time to look for a better place. I stumbled to the light and caught the post to hold myself up. The nausea was making me dizzy.

Yes I was define ely going to experience throwing up "Wanderer is that you? Wanderer are you me?"

The vaguely familiar voice was impossible to concentrate on Build made things worse knowing I had an audience as I leaned my face close to the bush and violently choked up my most recent meal

"Wilds your Healer here?" the voice asked. It sounded far away through the ouzzing in my cars. A hand, out ted my arched back. "Do you need an ambulance?"

I coughed twice and shook my head. I was sure it was over my stomach was empty.

"I'm not ill " I said I as pulled myself upright using the lamppost for support. I looked over to see who was watching my moment of disgrace.

The Seeker from Chicago had her cell phone in her hand, trying to Jecide which authority to call. I took one good look at her and bent over the leaves again. Empty stomach or no she was the last person I needed to see right now.

But as my stomach heaved asclessly. I realized that there would be a reason for her presence.

Oh, no Oh, no no no no no no!

"Why?" I gasped paric and sickness stealing the volume from my voice. "Why are you here? What's happened?" The Comforter's very uncomforting words pounded in my head.

I stared at the hands gripping the collar of the Secker's black suit for two seconds before I realized they were in ne.

"Stop!" she said, and there was of trage on her face. Her voice rattled.

i was shaking her

My hands lerked open and landed against my face "Excuse me " I huffed "I'm sorry I don't know what I was doing "

The Seeker scowled at me and smoothed the front of her outfit "You re not we a and I suppose I start on you."

"I wasn't expecting to see you." I whispered "Why are you bere?"

"Let's get you to a Healing factity petrore we speak. If you have a flu you should get it healed. There's no point in letting it wear your body down."

"I don't have a fk. I'm not ill "

"Did you eat bad food!" You must report where you got it."

Her prying was very annoying "I did not eat bad food, either I'm hearthy."

"Why won't you have a Healer check? A quick scan you shouldn't neglect your host. That's irresponsible. Especially when health care is so easy and effective."

I took a deep breath and resisted the urge to shake her again. She was a full head shorter than I was. It was a light I would win.

A heat? It tried away from her and waited swiftly toward my

home. I was an igerously emotional. I needed to calm down before I did something inexcusable,

"Wanderer/ Wait! The Healer "

"I need no Healer," I said without urning, "That was just ... an emotional imbalance, I'm fine now."

The Seeker didn't answer I wondered what she made of my response I could hear her shoes—high heels—tapping after me, so I left the door upon knowing she would follow me in I went to the sink and filled a glass with water. She waited stient viwh le I mised my mouth and spat. When I was through, I leaned against the counter staring into the basin.

She was soon bored

"So, Wanderer — or do you shit, go by that name: I don't mean to be rude in calling you that,"

I d dnt look at her "I st.II go by Wanderer"

"Interesting, I pegged you for one that would choose her own."

"I did choose. I chose Wanderer"

It had long been clear to me that the notes spat I dinverheard the first day I woke in the Healing facility was the Secker's tall. The Seeker was the most confrontational soo. I'd come across in none lives My first Healer Fords Deep Waters had been calm kind, and wise even for a soo. Yer he had not been able to help reacting to her. That made me feel better about my own response.

I turned around to face her. She was on my small couch, nestled in comfortably as if for along visit. Her expression was self-satisfied, the building eyes amused. I controlled the desire to scow!

"Why are you here?" I asked again. My voice was a monotone Restrained I would not lose control again in front of this woman.

"It's been a white since I heard anything from you so I thought I would check in personally. We've still made no neadway in your case."

My hands clamped down on the eage of the counter behind me out I kept the word relie from my voice.

"That seems overzealous Besides I sent vou a message last night."

Her evebrows came together in that way she had, a way that make her look angry and annoyed at the same time, as if you not she work

responsible for her anger. She pulled out her palm computer and touched the screen a few times.

"Oh," she said stiffly "I baven't checked my mail today."

She was quiet as she scanned through what I had written

"I sent it very early in the morning." I said. I was half asleep at the time. I'm not sure how much of what I wrote was memory or dream, or sleep-typing, maybe."

I went along with the words. Melanie's words as they flowed easily from my mouth, I even added my own lighthearted laugh at the end. It was dishonest of me. Shameful behavior. But I would not let the Seeker know that I was weaker than my host.

For once, Melanic was not smug at having bested me. She was not reserved, too graceful that I had not for my own petty reasons, given her away.

"Interesting" the Seeker murmured. "Another one on the loose." She shook her head. "Peace continues to educe us." She did not seem dismayed by the idea of a frague peace. Tarker it seemed to please her.

I bit my I p hard. Melante wanted so badly to make another dental to claim the boy was lost part of a dream. Done be stupid, I told her I had would be so options. It said much for the repel entinature of the Seeker that she could pur Melante and me on the same side of an argument.

I bate ber Melame's whisper was sharp painted, ke a cut

I know a know I wished I could detay that I telt — similarly Hate was an unforgivable emotion. But the Seeker was — very dafficult to like. Impossible.

The Seeker interrupted my internal conversation "So, other than the new location to review you have no more help for me on the road maps?"

I test my bod result to her critical tone. "I never said they were nes on a road map. That's your assumption. And no, I have nothing else."

She clicked her tongue quickly three times. "But you said they were directions."

"That's what I think they are I'm not getting anything more."

"Why now have it you subtried the human yet?" She at ghed loudly. Laughing at me.

I turned my back to her and concentrated on calming myself. I tried o pretend has she wasn there. That I was a latone in my actione known start glout the window into the interparch of night sky, at the here bright stars I could see through it.

Well as alone as I ever was.

While I started at the timy points of ght in the blackness, the lines that I diseen over and over again. In my dreams and in my broken memories, cropping up at strange unrelated moments. Bashed through my head.

The first a now rough curve then a sharp turn north another sharp turn back the other way twisting back to the north for a longer strench and then the abrupt so them decline that flattened out into another shallow curve.

The second is ragged zigzag. Four tight switchbacks, the fifth point strangely blunt, like it was broken.

The third is smooth wave intercupted as a sudden spur that swamp is thin, long finger out to the north and $b_{\rm max}$

In imprehens his seeming a mean rigiess. But I knew this was important to Melan e. From the very heginning I diknown that She protected this secret more fiercely than any other next to the boy her brother. I dihad no ities of his existence octors the dream lasting ht. I wondered what it was that had broken her. Maybe as she grew loader in my head, she would use more of her secrets to me.

Maybe she would so pup and I a suld see what hese strange meant I knew they meant something. That hey led somewhere

And at that mement, with he echo of the Seeker's adugh stall hang in the air I soudenly realized why her were so important

They en back to lated of course Back to both of them lated and Jame Where ease? What other location could possibly hold any meaning or her? Only now a saw that it was no back, because none of them had ever browed these lines before. If nest hat had been as much of a mystery to her as they were to me until

The war was slow to block me. She was distracted, paving more aften ion to the Scener than I was. She flut cred in my head at a sound

behind me and that was the first I was aware of the Seeker's approach.

The Secret sighed "I expected more of you. Your track record

seemed so promising,"

"It's a pity you weren't free for the assignment yourself. I'm sure it you'd had to deal with a resistant host, it would have been child's play." I adn't turn to now as her. My voice stayed level.

She sniffed. "The carry waves were challenging enough even with

out a resistant host "

"Yes. The experienced a few settings myself."

The Seeker snorted "Were the See Weeds very difficult to tame?"

I kept my voice calm. "We had no trouble in the South Poie Of course the North was a tother matter. It was badly mishandled. We lost the entire to rest." The sadness of that time echoed behind my words. A thousand sentient beings, closing their eyes forever rather than accept us. They dicarled their leaves from the suns and starved.

Good for them, Melanie whispered. There was no venom at tached to the thought, only approval as she saluted the tragedy in my

memory,

It was such a touste. Het the agony of the knowledge it te feel of the dying boughts that had racked is with our sister forests pain, wash through my head.

It was death either way

The Seeker speke, and I tried to concentrate on just one conversation.

"Yes." Her voice was uncomfortable. "That was poorly executed."

"You can never be too careful when it comes to doing out power Some aren't as careful as they's would be "

She didn't answer and I heard her move a tew steps hack. Every one knew that the misstep ben nd the mass suicide be onged to the Seekers, who because the See Weeds couldn't flee had underestimated their ability to escape. They diproceeded recklessly beginning the first settlement before we had adequate numbers in place for a him scare assimilation. By the time they realized what the See Weeds were tapable of were willing to do it was too late. The next shipment

of h bernating souls was too far away, and before they diarrived the northern forest was lost

I faced the Seeker now curious to judge the impact of my words. She was impassive staring at the white nothingness of the bare want across the room.

"I'm sorry I can't help you further." I said the words firmly, trying to make the dismissal clear. I was ready to have my house to myself again. To ourselves. Meanie inscried spitefully. I sighed. She was so that of herself now. "You really shouldn't have troubled yourself to come so far."

"It's the Job," the Seeker said sartagging. "You're my only assignment. In a I find the rest of them, I may as well stack a lose to you and hope I get lucky."

Confronted

es Faces Sunward?" I asked gratet, to the raised hand for interrupting my lecture. I and not feel as comfortable behind the sectors as I usually did. My biggest strength, my on viteal credent all—for my host body had had little in the way of a formal edication on the run since her early adolescence—was the personal experience I usually taught from. This was the first world's history I dipresented this semester for which I had no memories to draw upon. I was sure my students were suffering the difference.

It was always amazing to me how some souls of ried the rise ves in the atfairs of whichever world they inhabited and ignored the rest at the iniverse. But it he tair perhaps Faces Sunward had been in his bornation when I re Wirld became notonous.

"Yes, they receive essential in thems from this sincke. And there in local their indomental anomina and the con-roversy of hire. World and the reason the pranet has not been closed though there has certainly been along rate time to pupa ato this a. There is also a high relocation percentage.

"When here World was discovered it was at first that ght tout the dominant species the Fire-Tasters were the only intelligent life-forms present. The Fire-Tasters of dinor consider the Walking Flowers to be their equals in a cultural prejudice. So at was a while even after the first wave of setting before the sous realized they ware manifering intelligent creatures. Since then if he World scien is shave focused the nettors on finding a replacement for the dietary needs of the Fire-Tasters. Spiders are being transported there to help, but the planets are hundreds of the years apart. When this obstacle is overcome as the modern soon limbs relithere is hope that the Walking Flowers in ght also he assimilated. To the mear time much of the brutanty has been removed from the equation. The lab burning a reportion of course, and other aspects as well."

"How can they "Faces Sumward trailed off anable to finish.

Another voice completed Faces Supward's thought "It seems ike a very of level isystem. Why was the plane, not abandoned."

"That has been debated naturally Robert. But we do not abandon planets, ghtly I here are many souls for whom Fire Wor, I is nome. They will not be upriloted against their will I looked away, back at my notes. In an a tempt to end their less is assign.

"But it's barbarie"?

Robert was physically younger than most of the other students - closer to my age in fact, than any other. And truly a child in a more importan, way Earth was his first world - the Mother in this case had actually been an Farth aweller too, betwee she tigiven herse for and he didn't seem to have as much perspective as older better traveled souls. I wondered what it would be like to be horn into the overwhelming sensation and emotion of these hosts with no prior experience for bullinge. It would be difficult in find objects by I area to remember that and he especially patient as I answered him.

"Every world is a unique expenence. Unless one has I ved on that world in simpossible to truly understand the ""

"But you never I ved on Fire World" he interrupted me. "You must have felt the same way. In less you had some other reason for skipping that planet? You've been almost everywhere else."

"Choosing a planet is a very personal and private decision. Robert as you may someday experience." My tone closed the subject absolutely.

Why now els them? You do think it's barbaric—and cruel and wrong. Which is pretty from if you ask me—not that you ever ao Wha s the problem? Are you ashance that you agree with Robert? Be cause be's more human than the others?

Me anie having found her voice was becoming downinght unbearable. How was I supposed to dencentrate on my work with her opinions sounding off in my head all their me?

In the seat behind Robert, a dark shadow moved

The Seeker coad in her us as black leaned forward, intent for the first time on the subject of discussion.

I resisted the urge to scowl at her. I didn't want Robert, already ooking embarrassed to mis ake the expression as meant for him. Melanie grumbled. *The* wished I wouldn't resist. Having the Seeker stalk our every footstep had been educational for Melanic, she used to think she couldn't hate anything or anyone more than she hated me.

"Our time is almost up." I announced with renef. "I m pleased to inform you that we will have a guest speaker next Tuesday who will be able to make up for my gnorance on this top." Flame Tender a recent addition to our planet will be here to give us a more personal account of the settling of Fire World. I know that you will give him all the courtesy you act one me, and be respectful of the very young age of his host. Thank you for your time,"

The class filed out slowly, many of the students taking a minute to chat with one another as they gathered their things. What Kathy had said about it endships ran through my head, but I telt no desire to join any of them. They were strangers

Was that the way I felt? Or the way Me ande to the It was hard to real. Maybe I was naturally antisocial. My personal history supported that

theory. I supposed. I dinever formed an attachment strong chough to keep me on any planet for more than one. It

I noticed Robert and Fixes Sunward Ingering at the classroom door locked in a discussion that seemed intense. I could guess the subject

"Fire World stories ruffle feathers."

I started slightly

The Seeker was standing at my elbow. The woman usually an nounced her approach with the quick tap of her hard shoes. I tooked down now to see that she was wearing sneakers for once — black of course. She was even timer without the extrainches.

"It's not my favorite subject " I said in a bland voice. "I prefer to have firsthand experience to share."

"Strong reactions from the class"

"Yes."

She looked at me expectantly as I warring for more. I gathered my notes and turned to put them in my bag.

"You seemed to react as we,, "

I placed my papers in the bag carefully not turning.

I wondered why you didn't answer the question."

There was a pause white she waited for me to respond 1 dian t

"So why diant you answer the question?"

I turned around not conceating the impatience on my face "Be cause it wasn't pertinent to the lesson, because Robert needs to learn some manners, and because it's no one else's business."

I swang my bag to my shoulder and headed for the door. She stayed tight beside me, rushing to keep up with my longer legs. We wasked down the hallway in shence. It wasn't until we were outside, where the afternoon sun lit the dust mores in the saity air, that she spoke again.

"Do you think you ever settle Wanderer? On this planet, maybe? You seem to have an affinaly for their teelings."

I bridled at the implied insult in hir tone. I wasn't even sure how she meant to insult me, but it was clear that she did. Melante sticred resentfully.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Te a me something. Wanderer Do you pity them?"

"White" I asked blankly "The Walking Flowerse"

"No, the humans."

I stopped walking, and she skidued to a half beside me. We were only a few blocks from my apartment, and I'd been harrying in hopes of getting away from her, though likely as not sheld invite herself in. But her question caught me oif guard

"The humans?"

"Yes. Do you pity them?"

"Don't you?"

"No. They were quite the brutal race. They were lucky to survive each other as long as they did."

"Not every one of them was bad"

"It was a predilection of their genetics. Bracality was part of their species. But you pity them it seems."

"It's a lot to lose, don't you think?" I gestured around us. We stood in a parklike space between two ivy-covered cornitories. The leep green of the tvy was pleasing to the eye especially in contrast to the faded red of the oil bricks. The air was golden and soft, and the smell of the ocean gave a briny edge to the honey sweet fragrance of the flowers in the bushes. The breeze caressed the bure skin of my arms. "In your other lives, you can't have felt anything so vivid Wouldn't you pity anyone who had this taken from them?" Her expression stayed flat, unmoved, I made an aften pt to draw her in to make her consider another view point. "Which other worlds have you lived on?"

She has tated, then squared her shoulders. "None. I've only lived on Earth."

That surprised me. She was as much a child as Robert. "Only one planet? And you chose to be a Seeker in your first ate?"

She nodded once, her chin set

"Well Well that's your business." I started walking again. Maybe if I respected her privacy she would return the favor

"I spoke to your Comforter,"

Ana maybe not Melante thought sourly

"What?" I gasped

"I gather votive been having more trouble than sust accessing the information I need. Have you considered trying another more pliable most? She suggested that and site note?"

"Kathy woman't tel you anything "

The Seeker's face was smug. "Site daint have to answer I'm very good at reading human expressions. I could to I when my questions struck a nerve."

"How dare your The relationship between a soul and her Comforter."

"Is sacrosance was I know the theory But the acceptable means of investigation don't seem to be working with your case. I have to get creative."

"You think I'm keeping something from you?" I demanded, too angry to control the disgust in my voice. "You think I confided that to my Comforter?"

My anger didn't faze her Perhaps, given her strange personanty, she was used to such reactions

"No. I think you're telling me what you know. But I don't think you're looking as hard as you could. I've seen it before. You're growing sympathetic to your host. You're letting her memories adiconsciously direct your own desires. It's probably too late at this point. I think you'd be more comfortable moving on and maybe someone clse will have better tuck with her."

"Hah!" I shouted. "Me ance would eat them alive "

Her expression froze in place

She dihad no idea, no matter what she though, she didiscerned from Kalhy She dithought Melanie's influence was from memories, that it was unconscious.

"I find it very interesting that you speak of her in the present tense."

Lignored that, trying to pretend I hadn't made a slip. "If you think someone e-se would have better luck breaking into her secrets, you're wrong."

"Only one way to find out,"

"Did you have someone in mind?" I asked my yo ce frigid with aversion

She grinned "the gotten permission to give it a try. Shouldn't take long. They're going to hold my host for me."

I had to breathe deeply I was 5.12king, and Meian e was so that of hate that she was past words. The idea of having the Seeker inside me

"Kathy woman't tel you anything "

The Seeker's face was smug. "Site daint have to answer I'm very good at reading human expressions. I could to I when my questions struck a nerve."

"How dare your The relationship between a soul and her Comforter."

"Is sacrosance was I know the theory But the acceptable means of investigation don't seem to be working with your case. I have to get creative."

"You think I'm keeping something from you?" I demanded, too angry to control the disgust in my voice. "You think I confided that to my Comforter?"

My anger didn't faze her Perhaps, given her strange personanty, she was used to such reactions

"No. I think you're telling me what you know. But I don't think you're looking as hard as you could. I've seen it before. You're growing sympathetic to your host. You're letting her memories adiconsciously direct your own desires. It's probably too late at this point. I think you'd be more comfortable moving on and maybe someone clse will have better tuck with her."

"Hah!" I shouted. "Me ance would eat them alive "

Her expression froze in place

She dihad no idea, no matter what she though, she didiscerned from Kalhy She dithought Melanie's influence was from memories, that it was unconscious.

"I find it very interesting that you speak of her in the present tense."

Lignored that, trying to pretend I hadn't made a slip. "If you think someone e-se would have better luck breaking into her secrets, you're wrong."

"Only one way to find out,"

"Did you have someone in mind?" I asked my yo ce frigid with aversion

She grinned "the gotten permission to give it a try. Shouldn't take long. They're going to hold my host for me."

I had to breathe deeply I was 5.12king, and Meian e was so that of hate that she was past words. The idea of having the Seeker inside me

even though I knew that I would not be here, was so repugnant that I fest a return of last week's nausea

"It's too had for your investigation that I'm not a skipper."

The Seeker's eyes narrowed "Well, it does certainly make this assignment drug on. History was never of much interest to me, but it nocks like I'm in for a full course now."

"You just said that it was probably too late to get any more from her memories." I reminded her struggling to make my voice caim. "Why don't you go back to wherever you belong?"

She shrugged and smiled a tight smile. "I'm sure it is too late for you metary information. But it you don't cooperate, she might just lead me to them yet."

"Lead your"

"When she takes full control and you're no beiter than that weak ling, once Racing Sung, now Kevin Remember him? The one who attacked the Healer?"

I stared at her eyes wide nostrils flored

"Yes, it's probably ust a matter of time. Your Comforter diant tell you the statistics, did she? Well, even if she did, she would it have the latest information that we have access to. The long term success rate for situations such as yours. — once a human host begins to resist.— is under twenty percent. Did you have any idea it was so bad? They re changing the information they give potential sett ers. There will be no more adult hosts offered. The risks are too great. We're losing souls, it won't be long before siles lasking to you talking through you controlling your decisions."

I hadn't moved an orth or relaxed a muscle. The Secker leaned in stretched up on her toos to put her face closer to mine. Her voice turned lew and smooth in an attempt to sound persuasive.

"Is that what you want, Wanderer? To osci? To fade away erased by another awareness? To be no better than a host body?"

I couldn't breathe.

"It only gets worse. You won't be you anymore. She a beat you and you disapnear. Maybe someone will niervene. Maybe they'll move you like they did Kevin. And you'll become some child named. Me anie who likes to tinker with cars rather than compose music. Or whatever it is she does."

"The success rate is under twenty percented I will spered

She nouded, trying to suppress a smile. "You're his ng yourself, Wanderer All it'e wor'ds voc ve seen all the expenences you've collected — they II be for nothing. I saw in your file that you have the potent a for Motherhood. It you gave yourself to be a Mother at least all that would not be entirely wasted. Why throw yourself away? Have you considered Motherhood?"

I terked away from her my face ill shing.

"I'm sorry," she mintered her face darkening, too. "That was impolite, Forget I said that "

"I'm going home. Don't follow."

"I have to, Wanderer, It's my job."

"Why do you care so much about a few spare humans? Why? How up you justify your *job* anymore? We ve won! It's a me frit you to join society and do something productive."

My questions, my implied accusations, did not ruffle her

"Wherever the fringes of their world touch ours there is death." She spoke the words peacetally and for a moment lig impsed a different person in her face. It surprised me to realize that she deeply be lieved in what she uild. Part of me had supposed that she only hose to seek because she illicitly craved the violence. "If even one soul is ost to your fared of your famile, that is one soul for many lint lithere is total peace on this planet my job will be sustified. As long as there are lareds surviving. I am needed to protect our kind As long as there are lareds surviving. I am needed to protect our kind As long as there are Mc anies leading souls around by the nose."

I turned my back on her and headed for my apartment with long strides that would force her to run if she wanted to keep up.

"Don't lose yourself. Wanderer." she called after me. "Time is running out for you!" She paused, then shouted more lost ally. "Inform me when I'm to start calling you Melante."

Her voice faded as the space between its grew. I knew she would follow at her own pace. This ast uncomfortable week seeing her face in the back of every class, hearing her foots eps behind me on the salewalk every day—was nothing compared to what was coming. She was going to make my life aim sery.

It telt as if Mc an elwere box noing violently $a_{\rm g}$ axist the inner wials of my skull

Let's get her canned Tell her togher ups that she did something undeceptable. Assaulted us. It's our word against hers —

In a human worst. I term nded her, asmost saw that I didn't have access to that sort of recourse. There are no higher ups, in that sense Everyone works together as equals. There are those whom many report to, in order to keep the information organized, and councils who make decisions about that information, but they won't remove her from an assignment she wants. I in see, it works like

Who cares how is works i, it doesn't belp us? I know wet's kild her. A granutous mage of my hands tightening around the Seeker's neck filled my head.

That som of thing is exactly why my kind is better left in charge of this blace.

Get off your high horse. You dienjoy it as much as I would. The image returned, the Seeker's face turning bide in our anagination, but this time it was accompanied by a herce wave of pacasare.

That I you not me. My statement was true, the image sickened me. But it was also perilously close to talse. In that I would very much empy never seeing the Seeker again.

What do we do now I'm not giving up You're not giving up And that wretches Secker is sure as helt not giving up!

I didnit answer her I didn't have a ready answer

It was queet in my head for a brief moment. That was nice. I wished the silence could last. But there was only one way to buy my peace. Was I willing to pay the price? Dio I have a choice anymore?

Melanie slowly calmed by the time I was through the trent door locking behind me the boits that I had never before turned — human artifacts that had no place in a peaceful worth— her thoughts were contemplative

I d never thought about how you als carry on your species. I didn't know it was like that

We take it very seriously, as you can imagine. I hanks for your concern. She wasn't bothered by the thick edge of front in the thought

She was still masing over this discovery while I turned on thy compuler and hugan to mok for shi tile flights. It was a moment before she was aware of what I was doing.

Where are we going? The thought held all oker of panic. I text her

awareness began to rifle through my head, her touch like the soft brush of feathers, searching for anything I might be keeping from her

I decided to save her the search it in going to Chicago.

The panic was more than a flicker now #242

I'm going to see the tlealer I don't trust her a want to talk in him before I make my decision

There was a brief sileace before she spoke again.

The decision to kill me?

Yes, that one

Loved

ou re afraid to five." The Seeker's voice was full of disbelief edging toward mockery. "You've traveled through deep space eight times and you're afraid to take a shuttle to Tueson. Arizona?"

"First of a... I'm not afraid. Second, when I traveled through Jeep space I wasn't exactly aware of where I was, what with being stored in a hibernation chamber. And third, this host gets motion sickness on shuttles."

The Seeker rolled her eyes in disgust. "So take medication! What would you have done if Healer Fords hadn't relocated to Saint Mary's? Would you be driving to Chicago?"

"No. But since the option of driving is now reasonable. I will take the will be nice to see a bit more of this world. The desert can be sturning —"

"The desert is dead boring."

and I'm not in any burry. I have many things to think through, and I will appreciate some time atone." I looked pointedly at her as I emphasized the last word.

"I don't understand the point of visiting your old Healer anyway. There are many competent Healers here."

"I'm comfortable with Healer Fords. He has experience with this and I don't trist that I have all the information a need." I gave her another significant look

"You don't have time to not burry. Wanderer, I recognize the signs,"

"Forgive me if I don't consider your information impartial. I know ebough of human behavior to recognize die's gas of man pluation."

She glowered at me.

I was packing my rental car with the texthings I planned to take with me. I had enough clothes to go a week between washing and the basic hygiene necessities. Phough I wasn't bringing much I was leaving even less bolind. I'd accorn a ated very little in the way of personal belongings. After all these months in my small apartment, the ways were still bare, the shelves empty. Perhaps I'd never meant to settle here.

The Seeker was planted on the sidewalk next to my open trunk.

855al ing me with snice questions and comments whenever I was in hearing distance. At least I was seen rein the belief that sile was far too impatient to follow me on the road. She would take a shortle to Tuc son just as she was hoping to shame me into doing. It was a huge reflief I imagined her juming me every time I stopped to eat, hovering outside gas station bathrooms, her mexhaustions inquisitions waiting for me whenever my vehicle poused at a light. I shuddered at the thought. If a new body meant freeing myself of the Seeker well that was quite an inducement.

I had another choice, too I could abandon this entire world as a failure and move on to a tenth planet. I could work to torget this whole experience. Earth could be just a short blip in my otherwise spot ess record.

But where would I go? A planet I d already experienced? The Singling World had been one of my favorities but to give up sight for blindness? The Planet of the Flowers was love v. Yet chloropidlibased life forms had so little range of emotion. It would feel unbear above slow after the tempo of this human place.

A new planet. There was a recent acquisition — here on Earth they were calling the new hosts Dolphins for ack of a better comparison though they resembled dragonflies more than marine mammals. A highly developed species and certainly mobile our after my ongostay with the See Weeds, the thought of another water planet was repugnant to me.

Nowhere was still so much to this planet that I hadn't experienced Nowhere else in the known universe called to me as strongly as this shady little green yard on this quiet street. Or he dithe larg of the empty described which I discended in Me arries memories.

Melanie did not share her opinion on my options. She had been very quiet since my decision to find Fords Deep Waters my first I tealer. I wasne sure what the Jerochment meant. Was she trying to seem less dangerous less of a barden? Was she preparing herse to or the invasion of the Seeker? For deat ? Or was she preparing to fight me? To try to take over?

Whatever her plan ishe kept herself distant. She was just a fain, waterful presence in the back of my head.

I made my last trip inside searching for anything forgotten. The apartment moked empty. There were only the basic it mishings that had open at the fast tenant. The same plates were still to the cup boards, the privile on the head the tamps on the tables, it I didn't come back, there would be it is for the next tenant to clear out.

The phone rang as I was stepping out the doc't and I turned back to get it but I was too ate I dialready set the mossage system to answer on the first ring. I knew what the caller would hear my vague explanation that I would be out the rest of the semester and that my classes would be cance explained a replacement could be found. Not reason given I booked at the clock on top of the celevision. It was barely past eight in the morning I was sure it must be 0 art on the phone having just received the only slig to more detailed on my commitment to a malmist like I was already skipping. Perhops this step this quitting was the preliade of my next decision, my greater shame. The thought was uncomfortable. It made me tink to get listen to whatever the message said though I was it in any real highry to leave

I looked around the empty apartment one more time. There was no sense of leaving anything behind me ino fondness for these rooms. I had the strange feeling that this world—not sust Melanie, but the entire orb of the planet — did not want me ino matter how much I wanted it. I just couldn't seem to get my roots in I smalled write at thought of roots. This feeling was just superstitious nonsense.

I dinever had a host that was capable of superstition, it was an interesting sensation. Like knowing you were being watched without being able to find the watcher. It raised goose bumps on the nape of my neck.

I shut the door firmly behind me but did not touch the obsolete locks. No one world disturb this place until I returned or it was given to someone new

Without looking at the Seeker I climbed into the car I hadn't done much driving, and neither had Me ainel so this made me a bit nervous. But I was sure I would get used to it soon enough

"I is be waiting for you in Tueson," the Seeker said reaning in the open passenger stud window as I started the engine

"I have no doubt of that," I muttered

I found the controls on the door pane. Trying to hide a smile, I hit the button to raise the glass and watched her jump back

"Maybe "she said taising her voice to almost a shout so that I could hear her over the engine noise and through the closed window, "maybe I" try it your way Maybe II see you on the road."

She smuled and shrugged.

She was sust saying it to upset me. I tried not to let her see that she had. I focused my eyes on the road ahead and pulsed carefully away from the curb.

It was easy enough to find the freeway and then follow the signs out of San Diego. Soon there were no signs to follow no wrong turns to take. In eight hours I would be in Tueson. It wasn't long enough. Perhaps I would stay a night to some small town along the way. If I could be sure that the Seeker would be ahead, waiting impatiently rather than following behind, a stop would be a nice delay.

I tound myself looking in the rearviewin irror often, searching for a sign of pursua. I was driving slower than anyone else, unwilling to reach my destination, and the other cars passed me without pause.

There were no faces I recognized as they moved ahead. I shouldn't have let the Necker's taunt bother me, she clearly didn't have the temperament to go anywhere slowly S. I continued to watch for her.

Labee west to be ocean north and south up and down the pretty Carifornia considered but I dinever been east or any distance at all Civilization ellibehind me quickly and I was soon so trounded by the brank hills and rocks that were the precursors to the emply desert waste ands.

It was very relaxing to be away from civilization, and this nothered me. I should not have found the lone mess so we coming. Souls were sociable. We lived and worked and grew together in harmony. We were a little same, peaceful friendly honest. Why should I feel better away from my kinds? Was it Me ame who made me this way?

I searched for her but found her remote, areaming in the back of my head.

This was the best at had been since sheld started a king again.

The miles passed quickly. The dark rough rocks and the dusty plains covered in scrub flew by with monotoneous uniformity. I realized I was universe fas er than I dimeant to. There wasn't anything to keep my mind occup ed here iso I ound it hard to larger. Absently I wondered why the desert was so much more coloria, in Melante's memories, so much more competing I let my mind coast with hers, trying to see what it was that was special about this yacant place.

But she wasn't seeting the sparse local land si mounding us. She was dreaming of another desert, canyoned and red, a magical place. She didn't try to keep mood. In fact, she seemed almost unaware of my presence I questioned again what her detachment meant I sensed no thought of attack. It telt more like a preparation for the end.

She was a ving in a happier place in her memory, as it she were say ung good, ye. It was a place she had never allowed me to see before

There was a cabin, an ingenious fivelling recked into a nook in the red sa distone persiously close to the flash flood line. An unlikely place for from any raw or path by I in what seemed a senseless location. A rough place without any of the conveniences of modern eith noting. She remembered aughing at the sink one had to pump to provide water up from the ground.

"If beats pipes," lared says, the crease between his eyes deepening as his brows pull together. He seems whited by my lough its he afraid identifike it? "Nothing to trace, no evidence that we're here."

"I love it," - say quickly "It's like an old movie it's perfect."

The smile that never truly leaves his face — he smiles even in his sleep grows wide. "They don't tell you the worst parts in the movies. C'mon, i'll show you where the fatrine is."

hear Jamie's aughter echo through the narrow canyon as he runs ahead of us. His black hair bounces with his body. He bounces at the time now, this thin boy with the sun-darkened skin. Hadn't realized how much weight those hallow shoulders were carrying. With Jared, he is positively buoyant. The anxious expression has faded replaced by grins, we are both more resilient than I gave us credit for

"Who built this place?"

"My father and older brothers—helped, or rather hindered, a little. My dad loved to get away from everything. And he didn't care much about convention the never bothered to find out who the land actually belonged to or file permits or any of that pesky stuff." Jared laughs, throwing his head back. The sun dances off the blond bits in his hair. "Officially this place doesn't exist Convenien—sn't it?" Without seeming to think about it, he reaches out and takes my hand.

My skin burns where it meets his it leefs better han good, but it sets off a strange aching in my chest

He is rorever roughing me this way always seeming to need to reassure himself that fam here. Does he realize what it does to me the simple pressure of his warm palm next to mine? Does his pulse jump in his veins, too? Or is he just happy to not be alone anymore?

He swings our arms as we waik beneath a little stand of cottonwood trees, their green so vivid against the red that it plays tricks on my eyes, confusing my focus. He is happy here, happier than in other places—feel happy too. The feeling is still unfamiliar.

He hasn't inssed me since that first night, when ill screamed, finding the scar on his neck. Does he not want to kiss me again? Should I kiss him? What if he doesn't like that?

He looks down at me and smiles, the lines around his eyes crinkling into little webs—wonder f he is as haridsome as—think he is, or if its just that he's the only person left in the whole would besides lamie and me

No. don't think that's it He really is beautiful.

"What are you thinking, Mei?" he asks. "You seem to be concentrating on something very important." He laughs.

shrug, and my stomach flutters. "It's beautiful here."

He looks around its. "Yes, But then, isn't home always beautiful?"

"Home" I repeat the word quietly "Home".

"Your home, too, if you want it"

"I want it "it seems like every mile live walked in the past three years has been toward this place in ever want to leave, though I know we'll have to Food doesn't grow on trees flouin the desert at least."

He squeezes my hand, and my heart punches against my ribs. It is just like pain, this pleasure.

There was a burring sensation as Me ame skipped ahead, her thoughts dancing through the hot day until hours after the sun had fallen behind the red canyon was s. I went along, almost hypnotized by the endless road stretching ahead of me, the skeleral bushes flying by with mind-numbing sameness.

peek into the one harrow, the bedroom. The full-size mattress is only inches away from the rough stone walls on either side.

If gives me a deep, rich sense of toy to see Jamie asleep on a real bed, his head on a soft pillow. His lanky arms and legs sprawl out, leaving little room for me where, am meant to sleep. He is so much bigger in reality than the way, see him in my head. Almost ten, soon he won, be a child at all Except that he will always be a child to me.

Jamie breathes evenly sleeping sound. There is no teal in his dream for this moment at least

shut the door quietly and go back to the small couch where lared waits

"Thank you," whisper though I know shouting the words wouldn't wake same now. "I fee, bad. This couch is much too short for you. Maybe you should take the bed with Jamie."

Jared chuckies. "Mex you're only a few inches shorter than lam biesp comfortably, for once. Next fine I'm out. "Il stea myseif a cot or some-thing."

I don't like this, for lots of reasons. Will he be leaving soon? Will he take

us with him when he goes? Does he see this room assignment as a permanent thing?

He drops his arm around my shoulders and tucks me against his side. I scoot closer though the heat of touching him has my heart aching again.

"Why the frown?" he asks.

"When will you - when will we have to leave again?"

He shrugs. "We scavenged enough on our way up that we're set for a few months." can do a few short raids. I you want to stay in one place for a while I'm sure you're fired of running."

"Yes, I am." lagree litake a deep breath to make me brave. "But if you go, I go."

He hugs meltighter. "I" admit i prefer it hat way. The thought of being separated from you. "He laughs quietly "Does it sound crazy to say that I'd rather die? Too melodramatic?"

"No. know what you mean"

He must feel the same way ido. Would he say these things if he thought of the as just another human, and not as a woman?

realize that this is the first time we've ever been really alone since the night we'met—the first time, here's been a door to close between a sleeping lamie and the two of us. So many hights we've stayed awake, talking in whispers, telling all of our stones, the happy stories and the horror stories, always with Jamie's head cradled on my Jap. It makes my bleath come faster that simple closed door.

" don't 'hink you need to find a cot, not yet."

feel his eyes on me. questioning, but ican't meet them. I'm embarrassed now, too late. The words are out.

"We'll stay here unto the food is gone don't worry live slept on worse things than this couch,"

"That's not what imean," isay, still poking down

"You get the bed, Mer im not budging on that."

"That's not what imean, either" it's barely a whisper "imeant the couch is pienly big for Jamie He won't outgrow if or a long time i could share the bed with a you."

There is a pause - want to look up, to read the expression on his face, but in too mortified. What it he is disgusted? How will is and it? Will he make me go away?

His warm, callused fingers fug my chin up. My heart throbs when our eyes meet.

"Mel, "!" His face, for once has no smile.

Ty to look away but he holds my chin so that my gaze can lescape his Does he not feel the fire between his body and mine? Is that all me? How can it all be me? It feels like a flat sun trapped between us it pressed like a flower between the pages of a thick book, burning the paper. Does it feel like something else to him? Something bad?

After a moment, his head turns, he's the one looking away now, still keeping his grip on my chin. His voice is quiet. "You don't owe me that, Meianie You don't owe me anything at ai."

It's hard for me to swallow "I'm not saying i didn't mean that felt obligated. And you shouldn't either Forget said anything"

"Not likely. Mel"

He sighs, and I want to disappear Give up I lose my mind to the invaders if that's what it takes to erase this huge blunder. Trade the luture to biof out the last two minutes of the past. Anything

"Mei, it doesn't have to be like that Just because we're together just because we're the last man and woman on Earth." "He struggles for words, something don't think live ever seen him do before. "That doesn't mean you have to do anything you don't want to I'm not the kind of man who would expect. You don't have to ..."

He looks so upset, shill frowning away, that I find myself speaking, though I know it's a mistake before I start. "That's not what imean." mutter "Have to us not what I'm faiking about and I don't think you're 'that kind of man. No. Of course not, It's just that —"

aust that lique him. grif my teeth together before, can humiliate myself more, should bije my tongue off right now before it tuins any hing else

"Just that - 7" he asks

try to shake my head, but he's still holding my chin tight between his fingers

"Mel?"

yank free and shake my head fiercely

He leans closer to me and his face is different suddenly. There's a new conflict, don't recognize in his expression, and even though, don't

understand it completely it erases the feeling of rejection that's making my eyes sting.

"Will you talk to me? Please?" he murmurs. I can fee his breath on my cheek and is a few seconds before I can think at al.

His eyes make me lorge, that lam mortified, that I wanted to never speak again.

"If got to pick anyone, anyone at all to be stranded on a deserted planet with, if would be you," whisper The sun between us burns hotter "Falways want to be with you. And not just in not just to talk to. When you touch me in dare to let my fingers brush lightly along the warm skin of his arm, and it feels like the flames are flowing from their tips now. His arm rightens around me. Does he feel the tire?" don't want you to stop "I want to be more exact, but can't find the words. That's fine it's bad enough having admitted this much. "I you don't feel the same way understand. Maybe it isn't the same for you. That's okay," Lies.

"Oh, Mel," he sighs in my ear and pulls my face around to meet his.

More flames in his lips, fiercer than the others, blistening - don't know what im doing, but it doesn seem to matter His hands are in my hair, and my heart is about to combust - can't breathe. - don't wont to breathe

But his aps move to my ear and he holds my face when my to find them again.

"It was a miracle more than a miracle when found you, Meianie Right now, if I was given the choice between having the world back and having you, wouldn't be able to give you up. Not to save five billion lives."

"That's wrong."

"Very wrong but very true."

"Jared," breatheir try to reach for his lips again. He pulls away looking like he has something to say. What more can there be?

"But. "

"But?" How can there be a but? What could possibly follow all this fire that starts with a but?

"But you're seventeen, Melanie And im twenty-six"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

He doesn't answer His hands stroke my arms slowly, painting them with fire

"You ve got to be kidding me." lean back to search his face. "You're going to worry about *conventions* when we're past the end of the world?"

He swallows loudly before he speaks. "Most convenions exist for a reason, Meil would feel like a bad person, like lives taking advantage. You're very young."

"No one's young anymore. Anyone who's su, vived this long is ancient."

There's a smile pulling up one corner or his mouth. "Maybe you're right.

But this isn't something we need to rush."

"What is there to wait for?" demand.

He hesitates for a long moment, thinking

"Well for one thing, there are some — practical matters to consider" wonder if he is just searching for a distraction, trying to stail that's what titles like it raise one eyebrow—can't believe the furnithis conversation has taken if he really does want me, this is sensetess.

"See" he explains hesitating, under the deep golden tan of his skin, it looks like he might be blushing "When was stocking this place wasn't much planning for guests. What mean is "The rest comes but in a rush "Birth control was pretty much the last thing on my mind."

feel my forehead crease, "Oh."

The smile is gone from his face, and for one short second there is a flash of anger, we never seen there before. It makes him look dangerous in a way I hadn't imagined he could. "This isn't the kind of would "d want to bring a child into."

The words sink in, and ill cringe at the thought of a finy, innocent baby opening his eyes to this place it is bad enough to watch jamile's eyes, to know what this life will bring him, even in the best possible discumstances.

Jared is suddenly lared again. The skin around his eyes crinkles "Besides, we've got plenty of time to in think about this." Stalling again, suspect "Do you realize how very, very in eightee we've been together so tall it's been just four weeks since we found each other."

This floors me. "That can't be."

"Twenty-nine days, I'm counting,"

think back, it's not possible that it has been only twenty-nine days since Jared changed out lives. It seems like lamie and changed out lives. It seems like lamie and chave been with Jared every bit as long as we were alone. Two or three years, maybe.

"We've got time," Jared says again.

An abright panic, like a warning premonition, makes—impossible for me to speak for a long moment, He watches the change on my face with worried eyes.

You don't know that "The despair that softened when he found me strikes like the lash of a whip "You can't know how much time well have You don, know if we should be counting in months or days or hours."

He laughs a warm laugh, touching his lips to the tense place where my evebrows pull logether "Don't worry. Met Miracles don't work that way ("I never lose you. "Il never let you get away from me."

She prought me back to the present — to the thin ribbon of the highway winding through the Arizona waste and, baking under the herce noon sun—without my choosing to return. I stared at the empty place abead and felt the empty place inside

Her thought sighed family to my head \ \lon never know how much time you'll have.

The teats I was crying belonged to both of us

Discovered

arove quickly through the I to uncuen as the sun fell behind me I didn't see much besides the white and ye low lines on the pavement and the occasional big green sign pointing me farther east. I was in a horry now.

I wash, sure exactly what I was in a horry for though. To be out of this, I supposed. Out of pain, out of sadness, out of aching for lost and hopeless loves. Did that mean out of this body? I couldn't think of any other answer I would still ask my questions of the Healer built felt as though the decision was made. Supper Quatter I tested the words in my head trying to come to learns with them.

If I could find a way. I would keep Mc an e-out of the Seeker's hands. It would be very hard. No. it would be impossible.

I would try.

I promised her this, but she wasn't stoning. She was still freaming. Giving up, I thought, now that it was too late for giving up to he p

I tried to stay clear of the red convon in her head built was there.

too No matter how hard I tried to see the cars zooming beside me the shuttles guiding in toward the port the few fine clouds at fitting over head. I one dot pull completely tree of her dreams. I mem wized fat ed a face from a clousand different angles. I watched famic shoot up in a sudden grow hispart, always skin and brines. My arms ached for them both — no the feeling was sharper than an ache illude-edged and violent. It was intolerable. I had to get out.

I drove almost blind valong the narrow two lane freeway. The desert was, it anythms, more monotonous and dead than before. Flacter more coloniess. I would make it to Tueson long before it mertime. Dinner: I hadn't eaten yet today, and my stomach rumbled as I realized that

The Seeker would be waiting to time here. My stomach to edithen hunger momentarily replaced with nausea. A too atteally my foot eased off the gas.

I checked the map on the passenger seat. Soon I would reach a trie pit stop at a place caded Picache Peak. Mayor I would stop to eat something there. Put off seeing the Scoker a few precious moments.

As I thought of this intamiliar name. Preache Peak there was a strange, stiffed reaction from Melanie. I couldn't make it out Had she been here before? I searched for a memory alsight or a size I that corresponded, but found nothing. Pleache Peak. Again there was that spike of interest that Melanie repressed. What did the words mean to her? She retreated into faraway memories, avoiding me

This made me cur ous. I drove a little tas en wondering it the sight of the place would trigger something.

A sourcey moun air peak—not massive by normal standards but towering above the low rough hills closer to me—was hoging up to take shape on the horizon. It had an utusual id stinctive shape. Melanie watched it grow as we traveled, pretending induterence in it.

Why a disht pretent, not to care when she so obviously dided was dish ribed by her strength when I tried to find out I couldn't see any way around the old blank wall. It felt thicker than usual, though I a thought it was almost gone.

I tried to gnore her, not wanting to the k about that — that she was growing stronger. I watched the peak instead tracing its shape against the pale housky. There was something familiar about it. Some

thing I was sure I recognized leven as I was positive that neither of us had been here before.

Almost as if she was trying to distract me. Melanic plunged into a vivid memory of Jared, cutching me by surprise

shiver in my lacket sualning my eyes to see the muted glare or the sundying behind the thick bostly trees. It tell myself that it is not as cold as. Think it is, My body just isn't used to this.

The hands that are suddenly there on my shoulders do not startle me though lam atraid of this upfamiliar place and lidd not hear his silent approach. Their weight is too familiar

"You're easy to sneak up on "

Even now, there is a smile in his voice

" saw you coming before you took the first step," I say without turning "I have eyes in the back of my head."

Warm fingers stroke my face from my temple to my chin, dragging fire along my skin

"You look like a dryad hidden here in the trees," he whispers in my ea. "One of them. So beautiful that you must be fictions."

"We should plant more trees around the cabin."

He chuckles, and the sound makes my eyes close and my lips shetch into a grin

"Not necessary." he says. "You always look that way."

"Says the last man on Earth to the last woman on Earth, on the eye of their separation."

My smile tades as I speak. Smiles cannot last today

He sighs. His breath on my cheek is warm compared to the chill for est air

"Jamie might resent that implication."

"amie's still a boy Please please keep him safe."

" 'I_I make you a deal." Jared offers. "You keep *yourself* safe, and . If do my best. Otherwise, no deal."

Just a joke, but I can't take it lightly. Once we are apart, there are no guarantees. "No matter what happens," unsist

"Nothing's going to happen Don't worry." The words are nearly meaningless. A waste of effort But his voice is worth hearing, no matter the message.

"Okay."

He pulls me around to face him, and lifear my head against his chest don't know what to compare his scent to it is his own, as unique as the smell of juniper or the desert rain.

"You and won't lose each other" he promises. " will always find you again" Being lared, he cannot be completely serious for more than a heartbeat or two. "No matter how well you hide I'm unstoppable a hide and-seek."

"Will you give me to the count of ten?"

"Without peeking."

"You're on." I mumble trying to disguise the facilithat my throat is thick with tears.

"Don't be afraid. You'll be fine. You're strong, you're fast, and you're smart."

He's trying to convince himself, too

Why am lieaving him? It's such a long shot that Sharon is still human. But when I saw her face on the news. I was so sure

It was list a normal raid, one of a thousand. As usual when we telt isolated enough, safe enough, we had the TV on as we cleaned out the pantry and ridge lust to get the weather lorecast, there isn't much entertainment in the dead boring everything is-perfect reports that pass to news among the parasites it was the hair that caught my eye. It the flash of deep, almost pink red that I'd only eyer seen on one person.

can still see the look on her face as she peeked at the camera from the comer of one eye. The look that said, in trying to be invisible don't see me. She walked not quite slowly enough, working too hard at keeping a casual pace. Tiying desperately to blend in

No body snatcher would feel that need

What is Sharon duing waiking around human in a huge city like Chicago? Are there others? Trying to find her doesn't even seem like a choice really if there is a chance there are more humans out there we have to locate them.

And I have to go alone. Sharon will run Imm anyone but me well she will run from me, too, but maybe she will pause long enough for me to explain. I am sure I know her secret place.

"And you?" lask him in a thick voice I'm hus sure lican physically bear this looming goodbye. "Will you be safe?"

"Neither heaven nor helt can keep me apart from you. Meianie "

Without giving me a chance to catch my breath or wipe away the fresh tears, she threw another at me.

namile curis up under my arm. The doesn't lit the way he used to. He has to fold in on himself his long, gangly limbs poking out in sharp angles. His arms are starting to turn hald and sinewy but in this moment he's a child, shaking, cowering almost liared is loading the car, lamie would not show this fear if he were here, lamie wants to be brave to be like lared.

"I'm scared," he whispers.

kiss his night-dark hair. Even here among the sharp, tesinous trees, it smells like dust and sun. If feels like he is part of me, that to separate us will tear the skin where we are joined.

"You'll be fine with lared." I have to sound brave, whether lifee that way or not

"I know that I'm scared for you. I'm scared you won't come back, like Dad."

, flinch when Dad didn't come back though his body did eventually, trying to lead the Seekers to us - it was the most horror and the most fear and the most pain id ever telt. What if ido that to Jamie again?

"I'll come back. I always come back."

"I'm scared," he says again.

have to be brave

" promise everything will be fine I'm coming back - promise You know, won't break a promise, Jamie Not to you."

The shaking slows, He believes me. He trusts me.

And another

can hear them on the floor below. They will find me in minutes, or seconds—scrawl the words on a dirty shied or newsprint. They are nearly illegible, but it he finds them he will understand:

Not tosi enough. Love you love Jamie. Don't go home.

Not only do break their hearts, stea their refuge too picture or little carryon home abandoned as it must be forever now. Or if not abandoned, a tomb see my body leading the Seekers to it. My face smiling as we catch them there

"Enough " I said out loud, cringing away from the whiplash of pain "Enough You've made your point. I can't live without them eather now. Does that make you happy? Becar se it doesn't leave me many choices, does it? Just one—to get rid of you. Do you tount the Seeker inside you? Ugh " I recoved from the thought as if I would be the one to house her.

There is another choice. Melante thought suftly

"Really?" I demanded with heavy sarcasm. "Show me one."

Look and see

I was still staring at the mountain peak. It dominated the landscape, a sudden upthrust of rock surrounded by flat scrubland. Her interest puted my eyes over the outline tracing the uneven twopronged creat.

A slow rough curve, then a sharp turn north another sudden turn back the other way, twosting back to the north for a longer stretch, and then the abrupt southern decline that flattened out into another shallow curve.

Not north and south, the way I d always seen the lines in her piecemeal memories it was up and down

The profile of a mountain peak.

The lines that led to Jared and Jamie. This was the first line, the starting point

I could find them.

We could find them, she corrected me. You don't know als the directions. Just like with the cabin. I never gove you everything.

"I don't understand. Where does it lead? How does a mot ntain read us?" My pulse beat faster as I thought of it Jared was close Janue, within my reach

She showed me the answer

"They're just lines. And tincle teb is just an old lunatic. A nut-ob, like the test of my dad's family." I my to tug the book out of Jared's hands, but he barely seems to notice my effort.

"A nutliob, like Sharon's mom?" he counters, still studying the dark pend marks that deface the back cover of the old photo album it is the one thing to haven't lost in all the running. Even theig affith loony Uncle Lieb left on a during his last visit has sentimental value now. "Point taken." If Sharon is still alive. It will be because her mother loony Aunt Maggie could give loony uncle Jeu a run for the title of Craziest of the Crazy Stryder Siblings. My father had been only slightly fouched by the Stryder madness. The uidn't have a secret bunker in the backyard or anything. The rest of them, his sister and brothers, Aunt Maggie 1, note Jeb, and uncle Guy, were the most devoted of conspiracy theorists. Incle Guy had died before the others disappeared during the invasion, in a car accident so commonplace that even Maggie and Jeb had struggled to make an intrigue out of it.

My father always affectionately referred to them as the Crazies. " think it's time we visited the Crazies," Dad would announce and then Mortt would grown which is why such announcements had happened so seldom.

On one of those rare visits to Chicago. Sharon had shuck me into her mother's hidely hole. We got caught—the woman had bhoby traps everywhere. Sharon was scoided soundly, and though I was sworn to secrecy, I'd had a sense Aunt Maggie might build a new sanctuary.

But remember where the first is picture Sharon there now, living the fell of Anne Frank in the middle of an enemy city. We have to and her and bring her home.

Jared interrupts my reministing "Nut jobs are exactly the kind of people who will have survived. People who saw Big Brother when he wasn't there People who suspected the rest of humanity before the rest of humanity furned dangerous. People with hiding places ready "Jared grins, still studying the lines. And then his voice is heavier. "People like my father if he and my brothers had hidden, ather than fought...... Well, they'd still be here."

My tone is softer hearing the pain in his. "Okay" agree with the theory But these lines don't mean anything."

"Tell me again what he said when he drew them"

sigh "They were arguing. Untile Jeb and my dad. Incle Jeb was trying to convince him that something was wrong, telling him not to trust anyone. Dad laughed it off Jeb grabbed the photo album from the end table and started. I aimust carving the lines into the back cover with a pencil. Dad got mad, said my mom would be angry Jeb said, Linda's mom asked you all to come up for a visit light? Kind of strange out of the blue? Got a little upset when only Linda would come? Tell you the mith. Trey I don't think Linda will be minding anything much when she gets back. Oh, she might act like it but

you'll be able to tell the difference. If didn't make serise at the time, but what he said really upset my dad. He ordered Uncle lieb out of he house lieb wouldn't leave at first. Kept warning us not in wait until live as too late. He grabbed my shoulder and pulled me into his side. Don't let em get you, honey he whispered. Follow the lines. Start at the beginning and ullow the lines. Incle lieb't keep a safe place fut you. That's when Dad shoved him out the door."

lared, nods absently still studying. "The beginning — the beginning — that to mean something."

"Does it? They're just squiggles, lared its not like a map — they don't even connect."

"There's something about the first one, though, Something familiar if could swear live seen it somewhere before."

sigh "Maybe he told Aunt Maggie Maybe she got betier directions" "Maybe" he says, and continues to state at uncle lieb's squiggles

She dragged me back in time to a much much older memory - a memory that had escaped her for a long while I was surprised to realize that she had only put these memories, the aid and the fresh, together recently. After I was here. That was why the lines had slipped intough her careful control despite the fact that they were one of the most precious of her secrets - because at the argency of her discovery.

In this blurry car vimemory. Melanie sar in her father's lap with the same album—not so tattered then — open in her hands. Her hands were tiny her fingers stubby. It was very strange to remember being a child in this body.

They were on the first page

"Do you remember where this is?" Dad asks, pointing to the old gray picture at the top of the page. The paper looks thinner than the other photographs, as if it has worn down. Flatter and flatter and flatter – since some great-great-grandpa took it.

"its where we Stryders come from," answer repeating what ive been taught

"Right That's the old Stryder ranch You went there once but bet you

don't remember it—think you were eighteen months old." Dad laughs. "It's been Stryder land since the very beguning...."

And then the memory of the plature itself. A picture should looked at a thousand times without ever learning it. It was black and white, faded to grays. A small rust c wooden house har away on the other side of a desert field, to the foreground, a split rail tende, a few equine shapes between the fence and the house. And hen behind that the sharp, familiar profile.

There were words, a label, scrawled in penci, across the top white border.

Seryaer Ranch 1904 in he morning shadow of

"Picacho Peak," I said quietly

He il have heured it out, too, even if they never found sharon. I know lared total have put it together. It is smarter than me, and he has the put ture, he probably saw the answer hefore I did. He cousa he to close

The thought had her so blied wan yearning and excitement that the biank wall in my head supper, entirely

I saw the whole journey now saw her and Jared's and famile's careful trek across the country always by night in their inconspicuous states vehicle it took weeks. I saw where she'd left them in a wooded preserve ourside the city so different from the empty desert they were used to. The cold forest where Jared and Jamie would have and wait had felt safer in some ways. Decause the branches were thick and concealing, on the the spinday desert forage that hid attread but also more dangerous in its untanitial smeals and sounds.

Then the separation is memory so paintful we skipped through it. flinching. Next came the abandoned building sheld induen in watching the house across the street for her chance. There conceased within the walls or in the secret pasement, she haped to find Sharon.

I showan have set you see that Melanie thought. The faintness of her silent voice gave away her tangue. The assault of memories, the persuasion and courcion, had tired her. You it will them a here in final her. You Il kill her, too

"Yes," I'm sed abud. "I have to do my dity"

Why? she marm red a most sleepily. What happiness with it bring you?

I d dn't want to argue with her so I sale not ling

The mountain comed larger ahead of us its moments, we would be beneath it. I could see a little rest stop with a convenience store and a fast food restaurant bordered on one side ovia flat concrete space a place for mobile homes. There were only a few in residence now with the heat of the coming summer making things uncombinable.

What now I wendered Stop for a late, sinch or an early dinner? I'll my gas tank and then continue on to Tueser in order to reveal my fresh discoveries to the Seeker?

The thought was so repeated that my jaw socked against the suduen heave of my empty stomach. I stammed on the brake reflexively, screeching to a stop in the mide ie of the lane. I was lackly there were no cars to bit me from behind. There were also no dravers to stop and offer their help and concern. For this moment, he bighway was empty. The simbest di which the pavement, making a shimmer id sappear in places.

This should not have fort like a betraya, the weal of commong on my tight and proper course. My first language, the true language of the soul that was spoken only on or riplanet of ong no had no word for betraya, or tractur. Or even loyalty — because without the existence of an opposite the concept had no meaning.

And yet I fell a deep we lot guilt at the very idea of the Seeker. It would be wrong to tell her what I knew. Wrong built I countered my own thought victously. If I stopped here and listened to the seductive suggestions of my host. I would truly be a traiter. That was impossible I was a soul.

And yet I knew what I wanted more powerfully and vividly than anything I had ever wanted in a lithe eight lives I dilived. The image of Jared's face danced behind my evends when I blinked against he sun — not Meianie's memory his time but my memory of hers. She forced nothing on me now. I could barely feel her in my head as she waited — I imagined her holding her breath, as if that were plissible — for me to make my decision.

I could not separate myse I from this body's wan a lit was me more

than I diever intended it to be. Did I want or did it want? Did that distinction even matter now?

In my rearview mirror, the glint of the sun off a distant car caught my eye.

I moved my foot to the accurator starting slowly toward the little store in the shadow of the peak. There was really only one thing to do.

Turned

he electric bell rang, announcing another visitor to the convenience store. I started got thy and dacked my head behind the shell of goods we were examining.

Stop acting are a criminal. Me anie advised

Im not acting I replied tersely.

The palms of my hands feat cold under a thin sheen of sweat, though the small room was quite hot. The wide windows let in too much sun for the load and aboring air conditioning unit to keep up.

Which one? I demanded

The bugger one, she told me.

I grabbed the larger pack of the two available is canvas sling that looked well able to hold more than I could carry. Then I walked around the corner to where the hottled water was shelved.

We can carry three gadons she decided. That gives us three days to find them

I took a deep brear i, trying to ted myself that I wasn't going along with this. I was simply trying to get more coordinates from her that

was all When I had the whote story, I would find someone —a different Seeker, maybe, one less reputsive than the one assigned to me and pass the information along I was just being thorough I promised myself.

My awkward attempt to be to myself was so pathet a that Melanie didn't pay any attention to it felt no worry at all It must be too late for melias the Seeker had warned. Maybe I should have taken the shuttle.

Ino takes I wash. Melante grumbled. I can't make you do anything you don't want to Jo I can't even raise my hand. Her thought was a moan of frustration.

I looked down at my hand, resting against my thigh rather than reaching for the water as she wanted to do so badly. I could tee her impatience her almost desperate desire to be on the move. On the tun again, just as if my existence were no more than a short interruption, a wasted season now behind her

She gave the mental equivalent of a short at that, and then she was back to business. C mon, she arged me Let's get going. It will be dark soon

With a sigh, I puried the argest shrink wrapped flat of water but tles from the shelf. It nearly hat the floor before I caught it against a lower shelf edge. My arms feat as though they id popped haltway out of their sockets.

"You're kidding me: "I excur med aloud

Shut up!

"Excuse me?" a short, stooped man, the other customer asked from the end of the aisle

"[$\eta_i = nothing$." [mambled, not meeting his gaze. "This is heavier than I expected."

"Would you are some help?" he offered.

"No no" I answered hastaly. "I .. just take a smaller one."

He turned back to the selection of pocato crips.

No. you as a not Mesante assured me I've carried becomer loads than this You've let us get as soft. Wanderer, she added in irritation

Surry. I responded absently, hemused by the fact that she had used my name for the first time

Lift with your legs

I struggled with the flat of water wondering how far I could possibly be expected to carry it. I managed to get it to the front register at least. With great relief I edged its weight onto the counter. I put the bag on top of the water, and then added a box of granosa pars, a roll of doughnats, and a bag of chips from the closest display.

X ater is way more important shan fond in the aesen, and we can only carry so much —

I'm mongry I interrupted Ana these are aght

It's your back. I guess, she saw growging y and then she ordered. Get a map

I placed the one she wanted, a topographical map of the county, on the counter with the rest it was no more than a propin her character.

The cashier a white haired man with a ready smile, scanned the bar codes.

"Doing some luxing?" he asked picasantly

"The mountain is very beautiful."

"The tranhead is just up that ... " he said, starting to gesture

"I" find a," I promised quickly prompthe heavy, badly balanced load back off the counter

"Head down before it gets dark, sweetie. You don't want to get lost."

"I will."

Melame was thinking sulturous thoughts about the kind old man. He was being nice. He's sincerely concerned about my welfare. I reminded her

You re aid very creepy, she tood me acidly Didn't anyone ever ten you not to talk to strangers?

I feit a deep tog of guth as I answered. There are no strangers among my kind

I can't get used it not paying for things, she said changing the subject. What's the point of scanning them?

Inventory, of course Is be supposed to remember everything we took when he needs to order more? Besides what sithe point of money when everyone is perfectly homest? I paused teeting the guil, again so strong withat a was an actual pain. Everyone but me, of course

Melante shield away from my feelings, worned by the depth of them worked that I might change my mind. Instead she focused on her raging desire to be away from here, to be moving toward her objective. Her anxiety leaked through to me, and I walked faster

I carried the stack to the car and set it on the ground beside the passenger door.

"Let me help you with that."

I jerked up to see the other man from the store, a plastic bag in his hand, standing beside me

"An thank you "I finally managed, my pulse thudding behind my ears.

We wanted Meanie tensed as if to run, while he lifted our acquisitions into the car

There's nothing to fear. He's being kind too

She continued to watch him distrustrully.

"Thank you." I said again as he shat the door

"My pleasure."

He walked off to his own yet die without a backward glance at us I climbed into my seat and grabbed the bag of potato chips

Lour at the map, she saw. Watt till he sout of sight

No one is treatching as I promised her But, with a sigh. I unfolded the map and are with one hand. It was probably a good idea to have some sense of where we were headed.

Where are we headed - I asked her. We've found the starting point so what now?

Look around she commanded. If we can't see it here we'll try the south side of the peak.

See what?

She placed the memorized mage before me a ragged zigzagging line four tight switchbacks, the fifth point strangely blunchke it was broken. Now I saw it as I should a tigged range of four pointed mountain peaks with the broken looking fifth.

I scanned the sayline least to west across the northern horizon. It was so easy it telt talso as tho gh I d made the image up only after seeing the mountain suboutte that created the northeast line of the horizon.

That's it. Melante almost sang in her excitement. Let's go. Sae wanted me to be out of the cut on my feet moving.

I shook my head, bending over the map again. The mountain ricige

was so far in the instance I could in igness at the miles between us and it. There was no way I was walking out of its parking locand into the empty desert unless I had no other option.

I see the rational I suggested tracing my hoper along a 1 in ofther on the map, an annamed road that connected to the treeway a few miles east and their continued in the general direction of the rai ge

More she agreed complacently. I eduster cache for

We found the unit aved road easily. It was pist a paid scar of flat dirt through the sparse shruobery bard thinks enough for one verice. It had a feeling that he road would be overgrown with lack of use in a different region—some place with more vita, vegetation, unlike the desert plants, but needed decades to recover from such a villation. There was a rested that is stretched across the entrance, screwed into a wooden post on one end looped, hosely around another post at the other. I moved quickly pull, githere are tree and pring it as he base of the first post, hurrying back to my running cut hoping no line would pass and stop to offer me help. The highway stayed clear as I crove onto the dirt and then rushed lack to refasten the chain

We both relaxed when the pavement disappeared tell id us. I was glad that there was apparently no one left I would have to be to the whether with words or sakinge. A one I to all ession a renegate

Melanic was perfectly at home here in the mode of nothing. She knew the names of all the spiny plants around is. She hummed their names to herself greeting them like out trivials.

Cre reste not a histor pret peur mesun h

Away from the highway the trappings of characters the desert seemed to take on a new life for Meanie. Though she appreciated the speed of the joltang care out verilies to a have the ground clear ance necessary for this off road triphas the shocks fem inded me with every pit in the differ she inched to be on her feet loping through the safety of the baking desert.

We would probably have to walk and all noo soon for my taste hat when that time came. I do been it would satisfy her I could feel the real desire beneath the surface. Freedom: To move her body to the familiar thy him it her tong strike with only her will for guidance. I may ment I all west myself to see the prison that was the without warm ment.

body. To be carried inside but analyse to influence the shape around you. To be trapped. To have no choices.

I shuddered and refocused on the rough road trying to stave oft the mingled pily and horror. No other has, had made me feel such guit for what I was. Of course mone of the others had stack around to complain about the situation.

The sim was cross to the trps of the western fulls when we had our first disagreement. The long shadows created strange patterns across the road, making it hard to avoid the rocks and craters.

There it is! Melanie crowed as we caught sight of another formation faither east a smooth wave of rock interrupted by a sudden spirithal swing aith in long finger out against the sky

She was all for turning immediately into the brush, no matter what that did to the car

Maybe were supposed to go all the way to be first andmark. I pointed out The rife dust road continued to wind in more or iess the right direction and I was terrified to leave at How e-se would I find my way back to civilization? Wasn't I going back?

I imagined the Seeker right at this moment as the sun touched the dark iz gaage ig line of the western horizon. What would she think when I didn't arrive in Tacson? A spasm of glee made me laugh out loud. Melanie also enjoyed the picture of the Seeker's furnits artitation. How long would it take her to go back to San Diego to see if this had all been a ploy to get rid of her? And then what steps would she ake when I wasn't there? When I wasn't anywhere?

It is couldn't picture very cleansy where I would be at that point I note a ary wash I is uncerningly for becare used for our it. Mel and insisted

I'm not sure we're supprised in go that way we

If twin he dury soon and we le hat e to stop. You're wasting time. She was silently showing in her frastration.

Cresaring time of I'm right Bestues its my time isn't he

She didn't answer in words. She seemed to stretch inside my mind reaching back toward the convenient wash

In the one some his so I making him our

Melanie fameu word essiy in response

Why aim t you thou me the rest of he lines of suggested. We come see if anything a residue before his it tons

We she snapped I another part my tear

You're being childish

Again she refused to answer. I continued toward the four sharp peaks, and she sulked

When the sun disappeared behind the fulls, night washed across the andscape abrup, young in note the desert was sunset brange, and then it was black. I slowed my hand turn inglaround the dashboard searching for the switch for the head, ghts.

Have you list your mina. We are hissed. Do you have any faca how it this home ights with a he out here? Someone is sure to use to

So what do we do now?

Hope the seat reclines

Let the engine idle as I tried to think of options lies les sleeping in the car surrounded by the black emptiness of the desert night. Meanie waited patiently knowing I would find none

This, crass year knote I sold her throwing the ear into park and twisting the kess out of the goition. The whole thing There can treatly he wiscone out here we want him answering. That ce re going in get hope tessly tool troing I had an abstract sense of the physical danger in what we were planning to wandering out into the heat with no backup plan no way to return I knew Me ame understood the danger far more clearly out she held the spec hes back.

She didn't respond to my accusations. None of these problems bothered her I could see that sile director wander alone in the descrit for the rest of her life than go back to the ite I dihad before. Even without the threat of the Seeker this was preferable to her.

I eatted the seat back as far as it would go It wasn't close to far enough for comfort. I doubted that I would be a ne to sleep, but there were so many things I wast traillowing myself to think about that my mind was vacant and uninteresting. Me anie was a lent too.

I crosed my eyes, time ng little difference between my lids and the moviness night, and dritted into anconsciousness with unexpected ease.

Dehydrated

καν! You were right you were right." I said the words out load. There was no one around to hear me.

Melante wasn't saving "I told you so." Not in so many words. But I could feet the accusation in her shence

I was still unwilling to leave the ear, though it was useless to me now When the gas ran out I had let it rott forward with the remaining momentum until it took a nosed ve into a shallow gorge—a thick it volet out by the last big rain. Now I stared out the windshie d at the vist, vacant p ain and telt my stomach twist with panic

We have to move Wanderer It's only going to ge, botter

If I hadn't wasted more than a quarter of a tank of gas so bhornly pushing on to the very base of the second andmark—only to find that the third milestone was no longer visible from that vantage and to have to turn around and packtrack—we would have been so much farther down this sandy wash, so much closer to our next goal. Thanks to me, we were going to have to trave on fool now.

Hoaded he water one bottle at a time into the pack, my motions unnecessarily deliberate. I added the remaining granola bars, ast as skiwly. At the while Melanic ached for me to harry. Her impatience make a hard to hink, hard to concentrate on anything. Like what was going to happen to us.

Common comm, see thanted until I lurched still and awk ward out of the car. My back throbbed as I straightened up It hart from sleeping so contorted ast night not from the weight of the pack he pack wasn, that heavy when I used my shoulders to life it.

Now cover the car, she instructed, picturally me ripping thorny branches from the nearby creosotes and palo verdes and draping them over the silver top of the car.

"Why?"

Her one implied that I was quite stupid for not understanding. So, no one finds us

But what if I want to be towner & hat if there's nothing our here but beat and write & e have no way to get home?

Home—she questioned, throwing theoriess images at me, the valuant apartment in San Diego, the Secker's most objications expression the dot that marked flucson on the map—a brief happier flish of the red canyon that's ipped in by accident. Where would that her

I turned my back on the cartignoring her advice. I was in too far already. I wasn't going to give up a I hope of return. Maybe someone would find the car and then find me. I could easily and honestly explain what I was doing here to any rescuer. I was lost I dilost my way... lost my control... lost my mind.

I for owen the wash at first letting my body fall into its naturallong strided rhythm. It wasn't the way I waized on the sinewalks to and from the university—it wasn't my walk at a s. But it fit the rugged terrain here and moved me smoothly forward with a speed that surprised me until I got used to it.

"What I hadre come this wave" I wondered as I walked farrher into the desert waste. "What if Healer Forus were still in Chicago? What if my path hadret taken as so cose to them?"

It was that utgency, but are — the thought that Jared and Jamie night be right here somewhere in this empty place—that had made it impossible to resist this sense essiption.

I'm not sare. Melanse acousties. I think I might still have cried, but I was afraid, who e the other souls were near. I'm stal afraid. Trusting you could kill them both.

We flinched rogether at the thought

But being here so close—It seemed like I had to try Please—and studdenty she was pleading with me, begging me, no trace of resent men, in her thoughts — prease and tiese this to have them. Please

"I don't want to. I don't know if I can burt them I'd rather "

What? Die myself? Than give a few stray humans up to the Seekers?

Again we flinched at the thought, but my revulsion at the suca comforted her. And it frightened me more than it soothed her.

When the wash started angling too far toward the north, Melanie suggested that we forget the flat ashen path and take the direct line to the third landmark, the eastern spur of rock that seemed to point fingeriske, toward the cloudless sky

I undn't like leaving the wash, just as I'd resisted leaving the car. I could tonow this wash and the way back to the road, and the road back to the highway. It was miles and miles, and it would take me days to traverse, but once I stopped off this wash I was officially adrift.

Have fatth. Wanderer We It find Uncle Jen or he Il find us

If the \$500, alove, I added, sighing and loping off my simple path into the brush that was identical in every direction. Faith isn't a lamituar concept for me. I don't know that I hisy into it.

Trust, then?

In who? You? I laughed. The hot air baked my throat when I inhaled.

Just think, she said, changing the subject, mashe well see them by tonight

The yearning belonged to us both the image of their faces one man, one child, came from both memories. When I walked faster, I wasn't sure that I was completely in command of the motion.

It did get hotter—and then hotter and then hotter still Sweat plastered my hair to my scalp and made my pale yealow. I shirt dang unpleasantly wherever it touched. In the afternoon scorching gusts of wind kicked up, blowing sand in my face. The dry air sucked the

sweat away crusted my hair with grit and fanned my shirt out from my body it moved as stiffly as cardooard with the dried salt. I kept walking.

I drank water more often than Me anie wanted me to. She begrouged me every mouthful threatening me that we would want it much more tomorrow. But I is already given her so much today that I was in no mood to is en. I drank when I was thirsty, which was most of the time.

My egs moved me forward withou any thought on my part. The crunching thirthin of my steps was background music. Iow and to dious.

There was nothing to see one twisted, brittle shrub looked exactly the same as the next. The empty homogeny is ed me into a sort of daze — I was only really aware of the shape of the mountains is thougettes against the pale, bicached sky. I read their our lines every tew steps, till I knew them so well I could have arown them blincholded.

The view seemed frozen in place. I constantly whipped my head around, searching for the fourth marker—a big dome shaped peak with a missing piece, a curved absence scooped from its side that Me anie had only shown me this morning—as if the perspective would have changed from my last step. I hoped this last true was it because we dibe lacky to get that fat. But I had a sense that Melante was keeping more from me, and our fourtheys end was impossibly a stant.

I snacked on my granota pars through the afternoon, not realizing until it was too, ate that I'd houshed the last one.

When the sign set, the night descended with the same speed as it had vesterday. Melanie was prepared, already scooling our a place to stop.

Here she told me Well want to day as far from the choda as possible. You toss in your steep

I eved the flafty looking calcus in the talling light, so thick with being colored need as that it resembled fur and shipdered. I he tount me to hist neep on the ground. Right here?

You see another option. She telt my pank, and her tone softened, as if with pity Look — it is better than the our A, least it is flat It's too hot for any crit ers to be at racted in your body heat and

"Critters" I demanded aloud "Critterse"

There were brief very unpreasant flashes at Jeadly looking insects and coiled serpents in her memories.

Don't worry. She tried to snothe me as I arched up on my tiptoes away from anything that might be hid no at the sand below my eves searching the blackness for some escape. Nothing's going to bother variances you bettier it prit. After all, you're bigger than anything ever indiffer. Another flash of memory, this time a mediant-size can be stavenger a covote. If they brough our thoughts.

"Perfect "I moaned, sinking down into a creach though I was straid of the black ground beneath me." A fled by wild cogs. Who would have thought it would end so is so trivially. How an ichmactic. The claw beast on the Misrs Planet sine. At least there dive some dignity in being taken cown by that."

Melanie's answer up tone made me picture her tolling her eyes. Stop being a haby. A ntring is going to eat you. Now the armin and get some rest. I morrow walk be barder than toady.

"Thanks for the good news." I grambled She was urning not a tyrant. It made me in ok of the human axiom Cive him. It inch and he is twee a min. But I was more exhans ed han I realized, and as I settled any I, ngly to the ground, I found it impossible not to sumple nown on the rough gravelly out and le my eyes case.

It seemed the just minutes later when the morning dawned blindingly bright and a ready hot enough to have me sweating. I was crusted in dire and rocks when I woke my right arm was printed under me and had lost feeling. I shook out the langles and then reached into my pack for some water.

Malanie cid not approve but I ignored her I boked or the half empty bottle I dilast drunk from in minaging through helf is and empires until I began to see a pattern

With a simily growing sense of alarm, I started counting I counted twice. There were two more empties than there were this indicates used in more than that my water supply

I time you that you were dronking for much

I didn't answer her but I pulled the pack on without taking a urink. My mouth lest hormble dry and sandy and tasting of blie I tried to ignore that thed to stop runting my sand; aper tongue over my gritty teeth, and started walking.

My stomach was harder to gnore than my mouth as the sun rose higher and lotter above me. It twisted and contracted at regular intervals, an icipal ng meals that didn't appear By afternoon, the hunger had gone from at comfortable to poinful

This is nothing. Melanic reminded me why you've been hungrier. You have, I retorted I didn't feel like being an audience to her endurance memories right now.

I was beginning to despair when the good news came. As I swang my head across the horizon with a routine, ha fhearted movement, the bulbous shape of the dome jumped out at me from the middle of a northern line of small peaks. The missing part was only a faint indentation from this vantage point.

Close enough. Mean e decided, as threlied as I was to be making some progress. I turned north eagerly, my steps lengthening. Reep a lookout for the next. She remembered another formation for me, and I started craning my head around at once, though I knew it was useless to search for it this early.

It would be to the east. North and then east and then north again. That was the pattern.

The litt of finding another milest, he kept me moving despite the growing wearmess in my legs. Melante arged me on chanting encour agements when I slowed thinking of Jated and Jamie when I turned apathetic. My progress was steady, and I waited till Me ance oxaved each drink, even though the inside of my throat feit as though it was blistering.

I had to admit that I was proud of myself for being so rough. When the dirt road appeared it seemed like a reward. It snaked toward the north, the direction I was already headed, but Melame was skittish

I don't ake the took of it she insisted

The road was just a sallow a neithrough the scrub, defined only by its smoother texture and lack of vegetation. Ancient tire tracks made a double depression, centered in the single rane.

When a goes the wrong way we a wave it I was already walking down the missile of the tracks. It's correctman weathing through the creosote and watching out for cholla

She didn't answer but her uncase made me teel a tile paranoid. I

kept up my search for the next formation - a perfect M two matching videans, points - but I is so watched the desert around me more carefully than before.

Because I was paying extra attention. I not cent the gray smough in the distance long before I could make out what it was I windered it my eyes were playing tricks on me and biloked against the dust that clouded them. The color seemed wrong for a took and the shape too solid for a tree I squirted in the brigh ness making guesses.

Then I blinked again and the smudge suddenly jumped into a structured shape closer than I dibeen thinking. It was some Kind of house or building, small and weathered to a dual gray.

Meanie's spike of palic had me cancing off the parrow lane unclinto the dichious cover of the harren brush

Had in I told her I'm now a abandonesa

thin are you know . She was hade ng back so have that I had to concentrate on my teet before I con I move them to tward

Who around alterons near the massel is for somety. The ard he better cage to my explaintation and knew at was because of where I now stood in physically and metaprotically in the mardle of nowhere Why due I no lorger be a protite society of soils? Why due I feel the I during the I during a belong? Had I ever really been a part of the commonsty hat was meant in demy own or was hat the reason belong my long line of lines over intransience? Had I always been an abertation in was this something. Melanic was making the most Had this planet changed me in revealed one or what I already was?

Mean e has no par ence for my personal crisis—she was ted me to get har away ment that building as tas as possible. Her thoughts yanked and twisted at mine paining me out of my introspection.

And down I ordered trying to locas my thoughts to separally them from hers It there is any ong that a time vibrather a hour who have a hour who have a hour who have your Uncle Jeb —

She resected that though harsh's Northe ratio are the out in the spendick that I suck to about I rule to are noticed by build a rate of the remarks one or you. I make his around har a better biding place.

And it whoever twen here became one of u I assured her, then they will the place. Only a human would use this way. I trued off suddenly afreid, too.

What she reacted strongly to my fright freezing as in place. She scanned my thoughts socking fit something I disease to inset me

But 1 d seen nothing new Mesante tohat if there are humans out here—not Uncle Jeh and Jared and James What if someone else found us?

She absorbed the idea slowly thinking a through You're right. They'd kn. is immediately Of course.

I ried to swallow to wash the taste of terror from my dry mouth

There won't be anyone else. Hino come there he's she reasoned. Your kind are far too thorough. Only someone acready in hining would have had a chance. So sees go check it on a you're sure there are none of you and I'm sure there are none of me. Maybe we can tinu something heighted something up can use as a weapon.

I shuddered at her thoughts of sharp knives and long metal tools that could be turned into this. No tocapons

I gh I tou are suct spineless creatures beat us-

Mealth and superior numbers. Any one of you even your young, is a bunared ames as dangerous as one of us. But you're like one termits in an anti-lil. There are moutons of us, as working angetner in perfect har mony toward our goal.

Again as I described the only I felt the dragging sense of panic and disorientation. Who was I?

We kept to the creosote as we approached the little structure. It looked to be a house just a small shack deside the road with no hint at a lof any other purpose. The reason for its location here was a mystery—this spot had nothing to offer but emptiness and heat.

There was no sign of recent habitation. The coor trame gaped, doorless, and only a few shards of glass clong to the empty window trames. Dust gathered on the threshold and spilled inside. The gray weathered was a scenario to ean away from the wind as if it always blew from the same direction here.

I was able to contain my anxiety as I walked hesitantly to the valuant door frame, we must be just as along here as we had oeen all day and all yesterday.

The shade the dark entry promised drew me forward, trumping my fears with its appear I stollistened intential but my feet moved ahead with swift sure steps I darted through the doorway, moving quickly to one side so as to have a wall at my back. This was instituted, a product of Melanie's scavenging days. I stood trozen there, an nerved by my bundness, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

The little shack was empty as well known it would be. There were no more signs of occupation inside than out. A broken labie slanted down from its two good legs in the middle of the room, with one rusted mera, chair beside it. Patches of concrete showed through big boles in the worn, grimy carpet. A kitchenette lined the wall with a rusted sink, a row of cabinets—some dooriess—and a waist high retrigerator that hang open revealing its moidy black insides. A couch frame sat against the far wall, all the cushions gone. Still mounted above the couch only a little crooked, was a framed print of abgs playing poker.

Homey Mclame though, re-eved enough to be sarcastic. Lis got more decor than your apartment

I was already moving for the sink

Dream in Melanie aduced helptil v

Of course it would be wasteful to have water tunning to this se times place, the souls managed details like that better than to leave such an anomaly behind. I still had to twist the ancient knobs. One broke off in my hand, misted through

I turned to the cupboards next, kneeding on the pasty carpet to peek carefully inside. I leaned away as I opened the door, afraid I might be disturbing one of the venomous desert animals in its air.

The first was empty back ess, so that I could see the wooden stats of the outside was. The next had no door but there was a stack of antique newspapers inside covered with dust I pulled one out, corrous, shaking the diff to the carrier floor and read the late.

I rom numen times, I noted. Not that I needed a date to tell me that

"Man Burns Three Year Old Daughter to Death" the heading screamed at me, accompanied by a picture of an angelic blond child. This wasn't the front page. The hereor detailed here was not so hid eous as to rate priority coverage. Beneath this was the face of a man

wanted for the murders of his wife and two children two years before the print date, the story was about a possible sighting of the man in Mexico. Two people it lied and three injured in a drunk-driving action that A fraud and murder investigation into the alleged suicide of a prominent local banker. A suppressed confession setting an admitted child molester free. House pets found slaughtered to a trush bin

I cringed, showing the paper away from me, back into the dark cupboard.

Those were the exceptions not the norm. Melanie thought quietly trying to keep the fresh horror of n v reaction from sceping into her memories of those years and recoloring them.

Can you see how we thought we might he able to do better though? How we could have supposed but maybe you didn't deserve on the excellent things of this world?

Her answer was acided If you wanted to weares the plane, you could have blown it up

Despite what your science from writers aream, we simply don't have the technology

She didn't think my joke was funny.

Besides I added, that would have been such a waste it's a topely planet. This unspeakable desert excepted, of course

That's bow we realized von were here you know, she saw, thinking of the sickening news headlines again. When the evening news was nothing but inspiring bution interest siones, when ped iphnes and junk ies were lining up at the hospitals to turn themselves in when everything morphed into Mayberry, that's when you tapped your hand.

"What an awful a teration " I saw dryly turn ng to the next cupboard

I pussed the stiff door back and found the mother lode

"Crackers" I shouted, so zing the discolared, half smashed box of Sa times. There was another box behind it, one that looked like some one had stepped on it. "Iw inkies." I crowed

Look. Melanie arged pronting a mental finger at three dusty botties of bleach at the very back of the cupboard.

What do you want breach for? I asked already ripping into the cracket box. To throw in someone's eyes? Or to brain their with the bottle?

To my delight the crackers, though reduced to crumbs, were still inside their plastic sleeves. I tore one open and started shaking the crumbs into my mouth, swallowing them half chewed. I couldn't get them into my stomach fast enough.

Open a bothe and smell it she instructed, ignoring my commentary. That's how my dad used to store water in the garage. The breach residue kept the water from growing anything.

In a minute. I finished one sleeve of crumbs and started on the next. They were very slate, but compared to the taste in my mouth, they were ambrosia. When I finished the third, I became aware that the sait was burning the cracks in my tips and at the corners of my mouth.

I heaved out one of the breach borties, hoping Me arise was right. My arms felt weak and noodley barely able to lift it. This concerned us both. How much had our concision deteriorated alterdy? How much farther would we be able to go?

The bottle's Lap was so tight. I wondered if it had melted into place. Finally, though I was able to twist it off with my teeth. I sniffed at the opening Larefully not especially wanting to pass out from bleach filmes. The chemical scent was very taint. I snifted deeper. It was water definitely Stagnani, milisty water but water all the same. I took a small mouthful. Not a fresh mountain stream, but wet, I started gitzzing.

Losy there. Me arise warned me, and I had to agree. We discrete into this cache but it made no sense to squander it. Besides, I wanted something solid now that the sait burn had eased. I turned to the box of Twinkies and likked three of the smooshed up cakes from the inside of the wrappers.

The last cupboard was empty

As soon as the hanger pangs had eased slightly Melanie's impatience began to leak into my thoughts, reeling no resistance this time, I quickly loaded my spons into my pack, pitching the empty water bottles into the sink to make room. The hieach lags were heavy, out theirs was a comforting weight. It meant I wouldn't stretch out to sleep on the desert floor thirsty and hangry again tonight. With the sugar energy beganning to buzz through my veins. I loped back out into the bright afternoon.

Failed

I stared into the distance, sick with disbelief that was turn og quickly to horror.

Yesterday morning I dieaten the last mangied Twinkle for breaktast. Yesterday afternoon I difer not the couble peak and turned east again. Meanie had given me what she promised was the last formation to find. The news had made me nearly hysterical with joy. Last night. I'd crunk the last of the water. That was day four

This morning was a hazy memory of banding sun and desperate hope. Time was running out and I disearched the skyline for the last milestone with a growing sense of panic. I couldn't see any place where it could fit the long flat line of a mesa flanked by baint peaks on er their end like sentine's buch a thing would take space, and the mountains to the east and north were thick with toothy points. I couldn't see where the flat mesa could be hiding between them.

Midmorning the sun was still in the east in my eyes — I'd stopped to result ditelt so wellk that it frightened me Every muscle in

my body had began to ache, but it was not from a the warking I could feel the ache of exertion and also the ache from sleeping on the ground and these were different from the new ache. My body was drying out, and this ache was my muscles projecting the torture of it. I knew that I couldn't keep going much longer.

I I memod my back on the east to get the sun off my face for a moment.

That's when I diseen it. The long flat line of the mesa, and stake able with the bordering peaks. There it was so far away in the distant west that it seemed to shimmer above aim rage floating, hovering over the desert like a dark enough. Every step weld walked has been in the wrong direction. The last marker was farther to the west than weld come in an our journeying.

"Impossible," I whispered again.

Melanie was trozen in my head anthinking blank, trying despet areas to reject this new comprehension. I waited for her my eyes tracing the undemably familiar shapes unto the sudden weight of her acceptance and grief knocked me to my knees. Her silent keen of deteat echoed in my head and added one more layer to the pain. My breathing turned ragges—a shundless tearless sobbing. The sun crept—p my back—ts heat soaked deep in nothe darkness of my hair.

My shadow was a small circle beneath mow ten I regained control. Painstakingly I got back on my feet. I my starp rocks were embedded in the skin on my legs. I didn't bother to brush these off. I stared at the floating mess mocking me from the west for a long, but time.

And find y not really sure why I d d it. I started wa king forward. I knew only this that it was me who moved and no one case. Melanie was so small in my brain — a tiny capsule of pain wrapped rightly in on her horse f. There was no help from her

My foots eps were a slow crunch crunch across the brittle ground. "He was I st a de uded old lunar clatter all." I murmared to my

self A strange shudder rocked my chest, and a hoarst coughing ripped its way up my throa. The stream of grave is coughs rattled on but it wasn't anti- I felt my eyes pricking for lears that couldn't come that I realized I was laughing.

"There was never ever anything out here "I gasped he

tween spasms of hysteria. Its aggered forward as though I were drunk my footprints training unevenly behind me

No. Melanic ancur ed from her misery to defend the faith she still clung to, it got it torong or something. My fauit

I aughed at her now. The sound was scened away by the scoreoing wind

Wait wait, she thought trying to put my attention from the joke of it all. You don't think mean, do you think that maybe they tried this?

Her unexpected fear caught me midfaugh. I choked on the hot air my chest throboung from my fit of morbid hysteria. By the time I could breathe again at time of my black humor was gone. Insunctively, my eyes swept the desert your looking for some evidence that I was not the first to waste my life this way. The plain was impossibly vast, but I couldn't hait my france search or remains.

No of course not Melanie was already comforting herself Jarea's too mart. He would never come out here unprepared like we did. He a never put Jamie in danger.

In sure you're right I told her wanting to believe it as much as she did I'm sure no one else in the whole aniverse court he this stupid. Be sides, he probably never came to look. He probably never figures it out. Wish you hadn't

My feet kept moving I was barely aware of the action. It meant so the in the face of the distance ahead. And even if we were magnically transported to the very base of the mesa, what then? I was absolutely positive there was nothing there. No one waited at the mesa to save us.

"We're going to die." I said. I was surprised that there was no fear in my rasping voice. This was just a fact I ke any other. The sun is hor. The desert is dry. We are going to die.

Yes. She was calm too. This ideath, was easier to accept than that our efforts had been guiced by insanity.

"That doesn't bother you?"

She thought for a momen, before answering.

At least I died trying And I win I never gave them away I never burt shem I did my best to find them. I tried to beep my promise. I die for them.

I counted uneteen steps before I could respond. Nineteen's uggish, futile crunches across the sand.

"Then what am I dying fore" a wondered, the pricking testing to turning in my desicuted tear ducts. "I guess it's because I lost then right? Is that why?"

I counted there four crunches before she had an answer to my question,

No she thought slower It doesn't less that way to me I think Well I think that maybe— you're dying to be haman. There was almost a smile in her thought as she heard the six would meaning to the phrase. Ifter an the planets and a the built you've tett hebrid you've finally hound the plane and the body you'd die for I think you've found your home, Wanderer

Ten crunches.

I didn't have the energy to open my lips at ymore. The had t aidn't get to stay here langer, then

I wasn't sure about her answer. Maybe she was trying to make me feel better. A sop for dragging her out here to die. She had won, she had never disappeared.

My steps began to falter. My muscles screamed out to me for mercy, as if I had any means to soothe them. I think I would have stopped right there, but Melanie was as always, tougher than I.

I could tee, her now not just in my head but in my I mbs. My stride lengthened, the path I made was strughter. By sheet force of will she dragged my half dead carcass toward the impossible goa.

There was an unexpected joy to the pointless struggle. Just as I could feel her spe could feel my body. Our body now my weakness could control to her. She gloried in the freedom of moving our arms and legs forward no marter how useless such a motion was. It was bliss simply because she could again. Even the pain of the slow death we had begun dimmed in comparison.

What do you timbe is out there's she asked me as we marched on toward the end. What was you set laner are re deal?

Nothing. The work was empty and hard and sure. There is a rea on we call it the final death.

The souls but e no belief in an afterife

We have so many less Any long more work a be too mach to

expect. We are a attred cath every time we seave a bost. We are again in another. When I die here, that will be too end.

There was a long pause with our feet moved more and more slowly

What about you? I finally asked Do you stru believe in something more even after all of this? My thoughts raked over her memories of the end of the human world.

It seems ake there are some things that can't die

In our mind, their faces were close and clear. The love we fel, for Jared and Jamie did tee, very permanent. In that moment, I wondered it death was strong enough to dissoive something so vital and sharp. Perhaps this love would live on with her in some fairviale place with pearly gates. Not with me

Would it be a relief to be tree of an I wasn't sure. It felt like it was part of who I was now.

We only lasted a few hours. Even Melanic's tremendous strength of mind could ask no more than that of our falling body. We could barely see. We couldn't seem to find the oxygen in the dry air we sucked in and spir back out. The pain brought rough whimpers areaking through our aps.

You've never had it this had. I teased her feebly as we staggered toward a dried stack of a tree standing a few feet taller than the low brush. We wanted to get to the thin streaks of shade before we fee.

No, she agreed. Never this bad

We attained our purpose. The dead tree threw its conwebby shadow over us and our legs tell out from under us. We sprawled forward never wanting the sun on our face again. Our head turned to the side on its own, searching for the burning air. We stared at the dust inches from our nose and listened to the gasping of our breath.

After a time, long or short we didn't know, we closed our eyes. Our aids were red and oright inside. We couldn't feel the faint web of shaoc maybe it no longer touched us.

How long? I asked her
I don't know, I've never died before
An bour? More?
Your guess is as good as mine

Where's a coyote taken you really need one?

Maybe well get study escaped class beast or something. Her thought trailed off incoherently.

That was our last conversation. It was too hard to concentrate enough to form words. There was more pain than we thought there should be. An the miscles in our body rioted cramping and spasming as they fought death.

We didn't fight. We drifted and waited our thoughts dipping in and out of memories without a pattern. While we were still acid we hammed ourselves a ullaby in our head. It was the one we'd used to comfort famile when the ground was too hard, or the air was too cold or the fear was too great to sleep. We feet his head press into the hollow just below our shoulder and the shape of his back under our arm. And then it seemed that it was our head cradled against a broader shoulder and a new jullaby comforted as

Our lids turned black but not with death. Night had fallen and this made us sad Wilhout the heat of Jay, we would probably last longer.

It was dark and shent for a timeless space. Then there was a sound

It hardly toused us. We weren't sure if we imagined it. Maybe it was a coyntellatter all. Did we want that? We didn't know. We lost our train of thought and forgot the sound.

Something shook us, pulled our numb arms, dragged at them. We couldn't form the words to wish that it would be quick now, but that was our hope. We wanted for the cut of teeth. Instead, the dragging turned to pushing, and we telt our face to itoward the sky.

It poured over our tace — wer con, and imposs hie it ar billed over our eyes, wasning the grit from them. Our eyes fluttered in inking against the dripping.

We did not care about the grit in our eyes. Our chin arched up, desperately searching our mouth opening and closing with build patthetic weakness, like a newly hatched bird

We thought we heard a sigh

And then the water flowed into our mouth, and we go ped at it and choked on it. The water vanished while we choked, and our weak

hands grasped out for it. A flat heavy the mping pounded our back anti-we could area he. Out hands kept cluiching the atti-ook ng for the water.

We definitely heard a sigh this time

Nomething pressed to our cracked ipsilar if the water flowed again. We guzzled, careful not to inhale it this time. Not that we careful time choked but we did not want the water taken away again.

We drank upper our belly streiched and ached. The water trickled to a stop, and we cried our abarsely in protest. Another rim was pressed to our aps, and we gulped frantically until it was empty, too.

Our stomach would explode with another mouthful, yet we blanked and theu to focus, to see if we could find more. It was too dark, we could not see a single star. And then we blinked again and realized that the darkness was much closer than the sky. A figure hovered over us, blacker than the night.

There was a low sound of about rubbing against itself and sand shifting under a heel. The fig. re-leaned away and we heard a sharp rip — he sound of a zupper, heatening in the absolute shiness of the night.

Like a blade light cut into our eyes. We moaned at die pain of it and our hand flow up to cover out closed eyes. Even behind our tests the light was too bright. The light disappeared, and we telt the breath of the next sigh hit our face.

We opened our eves caretally more of and than before. Whoever faced as salvery strained sald nothing. We began to the the rension of the moment, but it telt far away outside or rself. It was hard to care about anything but the water in our be a and where we could find more. We tried to concentrate, to see what had rescued us

The first thing we could make out after minutes of binking and squarting was the thick a biteness that less from the dark face, a minuton sporters of pale in the night. When we grasped that this was a beard — ke Santa Claus, we thought chactically—the other pieces of the face were supplied by our memory. Everything fit into place the big cleft tipped nose, the wide cheekbones, the thick white brows, the eyes set deep into the wrink our about of skin. Though we could see only bints of each feature, we knew how light would expose them.

THE HOST 1.7

"Uncle Jeb." we croaked in surprise. "You found us."

Uncle Jeb. squatting next to us, rocked back on his heels when we said his name.

"We now" he said, and his gruff voice brought back a hundred memories. "Well now here's a pickle."

Sentenced

re they here?" We choked out the words—they burst from us ake the water in our hings ball, expelled. After water this question was all that mattered. "Did they make te"

Under Jeb's face was impossible to read to the darkness. "Who?" he asked

"lamte. Jared." Our whisper burned like a shout. "Jared was with Jamie. Our brother! Are they here? Did they come? Did you find them, too?"

There was barely a pause.

"No." His answer was forceful and there was no pity in it, no feeling at all

"No," we whispered. We were not echoing him, we were protesting against getting our life back. What was the point? We closed our eves again and listened to the pain in our body. We let that drown out the pain in our mind.

"Look " Uncle Jeb said after a moment. "I, up have something to take care of You rest for a bit, and I'll be back for you."

We didn't hear the meaning in his words, sust the sounds. Our eyes stayed closed. His footsteps crunched quiet viaway from us. We couldn't ie, which direction he went. We didn't care anyway.

They were gone. There was no way to find them, no hope, lared and Jamie had disappeared something they knew well how to Jo and we would never see them again.

The water and the cooler night air were making us used some thing we did not want. We rought over to bury our face against the sand again. We were so tired past the point of exhaustion and into some deeper more painful state. Surely we could suep. All we had to do was not think. We could do that

We did

When we woke it was stiringht but dawn was threatening on the eastern horizon — the mountains were lined with dull red. Our mouth tasted of dust and a first we were sure that we had dreamed Uncle Job's appearance. Of course we had

Our head was clearer this morning and we noticed quickly the strange shape near our right check—something that was not a rock or a cactus. We touched it and it was hard and smooth. We nuaged it and the delicious sound of sloshing water came from inside

I no e leb was real, and he'd left as a canteen

We sat up carefully surprised when we didn't break in two like a withered stick. Actually, we telt better. The water most have had time to work its way through some of our body. The pain was demand for the first time in a long while, we tell hungry ago n

Our tingers were soft and coursy as we twisted the cap from the top of the cap een. It wasn't all the way full, but there was enough water to stretch the ways of our bely again of must have shrunk. We drank it all we were done with rationing

We propped the metal cancer to the sand where a made a dill thad in the predawn silence. We fell wide awake now. We sighed preferring unconsciousness and let our head has into our hands. What now?

"Why did you give it water Jeb?" an angry you. demanded close behind our back.

We whirled, twisting onto our knees. What we saw made our heart falter and our awareness spilit er apart

There were eight humans half circled around where I kne t under the tree. There was not question they were humans, all of them. I dinever seen takes contorted into such expressions — not on my kind. These ups twisted with harred praced back over clonghed leed to keep wild an mais. These brows pulled low over eyes that borned with fury.

Six men and two women some at them very big, most of them higher than me. I fell the blood drain from my face as I realized why they held their hands so odd vill grip ped tightly in tront of them, each balancing an object. They held weapons. Some held blades in a few short ones like those I had kept in my kitchen, and some longer inchange and menacing. This krafe had no purpose in a kitchen. Melanie supplied the name; a machete.

Others held long bars, some metal, some wonden a lubs

I recognized I note job in their oliust. Held loosely in his hands was an object I a never seen in person, only in Melanie's memories, like the big kmfe. It was a rifle

I saw horror but M. an e saw all this with wonder her nind bog ging at their numbers. Eight human survivors. She dithough Heb was alone or an the best case scenario, with only two of ers. To see so many of her kind alive filled her with joy.

Ymere an iano. I told her Look at them. See them

I forced her to see it from my perspective to see the threatening shapes inside the dirty jeans and light cotton shirts, brown with dust. They might have been human—as she thought of the write—once but at this moment they were something else. They were barbarians, monsters. They hing over us is average for blood.

There was a hearth ser tence in every pair of eves

Me anie saw a this and though gradging vishe bacito admit that I was right. At this moment, her heloved humans were at their worst like the newspaper stories we discenting he abandoned shack. We were looking at killers,

We should have been waser we should have died vesterday

Why wor id chicle lob keep is a ve for this?

A shiver passed brough me at the thought. I'd skimmed through the his ories of human atrocities. I'd had no stomach for them. Per

haps I should have concentrated better. I knew there were reasons why hamans for their enemies live for a lattic while. Things they wanted from their mands or their hodges.

Of course it sprang into my head immediately—the one secret they would want from me. The ant I could lever never tell them. No matter what they did to me. I would have to k—myself first

I did not let Melanic see the secret I protected. I used her own defenses against her and threw up a wall in my head to bide behind white I thought of the information for the first time since implantation. There had been no reason to think of it before.

Melanic was hard viewen curious on the other side of the wall, she made no effort to break through it. There were much more immediate concerns than the fact that she had not been the only one keeping information in reserve.

Did it matter that I protected it visecret from her? I wasn't as strong as Melanie. I had no doubt she could endure torture. How much pain could I stand before I gave them anything they wanted?

My stomach heaved. So icide was a repugnant option. Worse because it would be marder too. Melanie would be part of either torture or death. I would wait for that antil I had absolitely no other choice.

No, they can't Unite leb would never les them burt me Uncle lep doesn't know you're here. I tem nded her Tell him

I tocased on the old mans face. The thick white beard kept me from seeing the set of his mouth, but his eyes did not seem to burn like the others. From the corner of my eye. I could see a few of the men so if their gaze from me to him. They were waiting for him io answer the question that had a creed me to their presence. I note Jell stared at me, ignoring them.

I can't ten bun Me aute He won, heneve me And if they think I me to ug to them they II think em a Neeker. They must have experience enough to know that only a Seeker would come out here with a security designed for infiltration.

Me an encognized the frith of my thought at once. The very word Scener made her recoil with hatred, and she knew these straigers would have the same reaction.

It doesn't maker anyway. I'm a soud - shalls enough for them

The one with the machete — the aggest man there black haired with oudly fair skip and vivid bride eyes — made a sound of disgust and spit on the ground. He took a step forward, slowly raising the long blade.

Better fast than slow. Better that it was this brutal hand and not mine that it lied us. Better that I didn't die a creature of violence, accountable for Melanie's blood as well as my own.

"Hole it Kyle" leb's words were inhurried almost casual but the big man stopped. He grimaced and turned to face Melanic's uncle

"Why? You said you made sure. It's one of them."

I recognized the voice is he was the same one who diasked Jeb why he digiven me water

"Well, yes, she surely is But it's a little complicated."

"How?" A different man asked the question. He stood next to the big, dark haired Kize, and they looked so much anke that they had to be brothers.

"See, this here is my mece, too."

"Not anymore she's not." Kyle said flatly. He spit again and took another itemberate step in my direction, knife ready. I could see from the way his shoulders leaned into the act on that words would not stop him again. I closed my eyes.

There were two sharp metall, clicks and someone gasped. My eyes flew open again

"I said how it, Kyle" I note leb's voice was stal relaxed, but the long "fle was gripped tightly in his hands now, and the barrels were pointed at Kyle's back. Kyle was frozen list steps from me his machete hang motionless in the air above his shoulder.

"Job," the brother said horrified "what are you doing?"

"Step away from the girl, Kyle,"

Kyle turned his back to us, whithing on Jeb in it ry "It's not a girl Jeb!"

Jeb shrugged the gun staved steady in his hands, pointed at Kyle. "There are things to be discussed."

"The doctor ring it be able to learn something from it " a tentale voice offered gruffly.

I cringed at the words hearing in them my worst fears. When Joh

had caused me his niece just now. I ditoolishly let a spark of hope flame to life — perhaps there would be pity. I dibeen stupid to think that even for a second. Death would be the only pity I could hope for from these creatures.

Hooked at the woman who dispoken surprised io see that she was as old as Jeb, maybe older. Her hair was cark gray rather than white, which is why I hadn't noticed her age before. Her face was a mass of wrinkles, all, of them turning down into angry lines. But there was something familiar about the features behind the lines.

Melanie made the connection between this ancient face and an other smoother face in her memory

"Aunt Maggie? You're here? How? Is Sharon..." The words were all Melanic but they gushed from my mouth, and I was unable to stop them. Sharing for so long at the desert had made her stronger or me weaker. Or maybe it was just that I was concentrating on which direction the deathblow was going to fall from. I was bracing for our murder, and she was having a family reunion.

Meianie got only halfway through her surprised exciamation. The much-aged woman named Maggic langed forward with a speed that be led her brittle exterior. She addn't raise the band that held the brack crowbur. That was the hand I was watching, so I didn't see her free hand swing out to slap me hard across the face.

My head shaj ped back and then forward. She slapped me again. "You won't fool us you parasite. We know how you work. We know

how well you can mimic us."

I tasted blood inside my cheek

Dent do that again, I scouded Me arise I told you what they d think

Melanie was too shocked to answer

"Now, Maggie " Jeb began in a sonthing tone

"Don't you 'Now Maggie me you old 'ool. She's probably led a legion of them down on as." She backed away from me her eyes measuring my stimess as if I were a coiled snake. She stopped health hrother

"I don't see anyone," leb retorted. "Here" he yes ear and I flanched in surprise. I wasn't the only line. Jeb waved his left hand over his head, the gain star elenched in the right. "Over here."

"Shut up," Maggie growled shoving his chest. Though a hau good reason to know she was strong, leb aidn't wobble.

"She's alone Mag. She was pretty much dead when I found her she's not in such great shape now. The centipedes don't sacrifice their own that way. They would have come for her much sooner than I did. Whatever else she is, she's alone."

I saw the image of the long many-legged insect in my head, but I didn't make the connection.

He's tasking about you. Melanie translated. She placed the picture of the agly bug next to my memory of a bright silver soul. I didn't see a resemblance.

I wonder both he knows what you look like. Melante wondered absent v. My memories of a soul's true appearance had been new to her in the beginning.

I didn't have time to wonder with her. Jeb was walking toward me, and the others were close behind. Kyle's hand hovered at Jeb's shoulder, ready to restrain him or throw him out of the way, I couldn't tell.

Jeb put his gun in his left hand and extended the right to me. I eved it wardy, waiting for it to hit me.

"C'mon" he urged gent y. "If I could carry you that far I woulda brought you home last night. You're gonna have to walk some more."

"No." Kyle grunted.

"I'm taken her back," Jeb said, and for the best time there was a harsher tone to his voice. Under his beard, his jaw flexed into a stubborn line.

"Jeb!" Maggie protested

" Simi place Mag. 1 do what I want?"

"Old fool!" she snapped again.

Jeb reached down and granbed my hand from where it lay curled into a fist against my thigh. He vanked me to my feet. It was not cruelty it was merely as if he was in a hurry. Yet was it not the very worst form of cruelly to prolong my i to tor the reasons he had?

I rocked anstead by I couldn't fee, my legs very well—just prick les like needle points as the blood flowed down

There was a hiss of disapproval behind him it came from more than one mouth.

"Okay, whoever you are," he said to me his voice still kind. "Let's get out of here before it heats up."

The one who must have been Kyle's brother put his hand on Jeb's

erm.

"You cann ust show it where we live Jeb."

"I suppose it doesn't matter." Maggie said harshiv. "It won't get a chance to tell tales."

Jeb signed and pulled a bancanna — all but hilders by his beard from around his neck.

"This is s , y " he mattered but he rolled the dirty fabric stiff with dry sweat, into a blindfold.

I kept perfectly still as he tied it over my eyes fighting the pance that necessed when I consunt see my enemies.

I couldn't see, but a knew it was Jeb who put one hand on my back and guided one; none of the others would have been so gettle

We started forward toward the north, I though. No one spoke at first—there was just the sound of sand grinding under many feet. The ground was even but I stumble I on my numb legs again and again. Job was patient, his guiding hand was almost chivalrous.

I felt the sun rise as we warked Some of the tootsteps were faster than of ters. They moved ahead of us anti-they were hard to hear. It sounded like it was the minority that staved with Jeb and me. I must not have looked like I needed many grands. I was faint with hunger, and I swayed with every step my head for the dizzy and hollow.

"You aren't planning to te him are you?"

It was Maggie's voice at came from a tew feet behanding and it sounded like an accusation

"He's got a right to know " Jeb replied. The stubborn note was back in his voice.

"It's an unwind thing you are doing Tebediah."

"Life is unkind, Magnoria."

It was hard to decide who was the more territying of the two. Was it Jeb, who seemed so in ent on keeping me alive? Or Maggie, who had first suggested the doctor—an appellation that hied me with instinctive, nauseated dread—but who seemed more wortted about cruelty than her brother?

We walked in silence again for a few hours. When my legs buckled Jeb lowered me to the ground and held a canteen to my, ps as he had in the right.

"Let me know when you're ready" leb told me. His voice sounded kind, though I knew that was a talse interpretation.

Someone sighed impatiently.

"Why are you doing this, Jeb?" a man asked. I d heard the voice before it was one of the brothers. "For Doc? You could have just told Kyle, hat You fight have to pull a gun on him."

"Kwe needs a gan pulled on him more often." Jeo muttered

"Please rell me this wasn't about sympathy." the man continued "After all you've seen . . . "

"After a I ve seen if I had, it learned compassion. I wouldn't be worth much. Bit no, it was not about sympathy at I had enough sympathy for this poor creature. I would have let her die."

I shivered in the oven-hot air.

"What then?" Kyle's brother demanded.

There was a long shence, and then Jeb's hand touched mine. I grasped it needing he help to get back on my feet. His other hand pressed against my back, and I started torward again.

"Curtosity," Job said in a low voice

No one replied

As we walked I considered a few sure facts. One I was not the first so: . they disaptured. There was already a set routine here. This "Doe" had tried to get his a iswer from others before me

Two, he had tried a successfully It any soul had forgone suicide only to crack under the humans forture, they would not necume now. My death would have been more fully swift.

Oddly I coulont hing myse tho hope for a quick end though of oury to effect that outcome it would be easy to do even without coing to a deed myse till would only have to tell them a lie is pretend to be a Secker tell them my codeagues were tracking mornght now bluster and threaten. Or to them the truth it that Meanie Lived on in side me, and that she had prought me here.

They would see another he, and one so richly tres stible—the idea that the hem in anidd ave an after implantation—so tempting to helieve from their perspective so insidious, that they would behave I

was a Secker more sure vithan it I claimed it. They would assume a trap, get makefine quick viand find a new place to hide far away from here.

You're probably right Melante agreed It's abut two addo

But I wasn't in pain yet and so either form of six cide was hard to embrace my instruct for survival search my lips. The memory of my last session with my Comforter — a time so civilized it seemed to be long to a different planet. I flashed through my head. Me ante challenging me to have her removed a seemingly stroidal impulse but only a high I remembered chanking how hard it was to contemplate death from a comfortable chair.

Last it ght Melante and I had wished for death but death had been only inches away at the time. It was different now that I was on my feet again.

I don't want in the either, M. and wrispered But maybe source a rong. Maybe that's now only were keeping as and e. I don't understand. I have a could. She don't wan to imagine the things they might do to us. I was sure she could come up with worse than I. What answer would be a want from you too both?

Il never telt Not you not any human

A both Jeclaration Bill then I wasn't in pain yet

And her hour had passed—the sun was directly overhead, the heat of it is selection of fire on my hair—when the sound changed. The grinding steps that I hardly heard any hore turned to echoes ahead of melletins feet strit crunched against the said like mine but someone in front of us had reached a new terrain.

"Care, ul now" Jeb warnes, me "Watch your lead"

I hesitated not stire what I was watching for or how to watch with no eyes. His hand, ett my back and pressed down on my head telling me to duck. I bent forward. My neck was stiff

He gluded me forward again, and I heard out tootsteps make the same echoing sound. The ground older give like sand. Jidn't fee, loose like rock. It was flat and so, I beneath my feet.

The sun was gone — I could no longer feel at burn my skin or scorch my hair.

I took another step, and a new air touched my face. It was not a breeze. This was stagnant is moved into if Till curvidesert wind was

gone. This air was still and cooler. There was the faintest that of moisture to it, a mustiness that I could both smell and taste.

There were so many questions in my mind, and in Melanie's She wanted to ask hers but I kept stient. There was nothing either of us could say that would help us now.

"Okay, you can straighten up." Jeb told me

I raised my head slowly

Even with the bundfold. I could true that there was no light. It was atterty black around the edges of the bandanna. I could hear the others be und me, shuffling their tee impatient viwa ting for us to move forward.

"This way," Ich said, and he was guiding me again. Our tootsteps echoed back from close by the space we were in must have been quite small. I found myse tracking my head it is inclively.

We went a few steps farther and then we rounced a sharp curve that seemed to turn us back the way we disone. The ground started to stant downward. The angle got steeper with every step, and Jeb gave me his rough band to keep me from falling. I don't know how long I slipped and skidded my way through the darkness. The hike probably felt inger than it was with each minute slowed by my terror.

We took another turn, and then the floor started to comb apward. My legs were so numb and wooden that as the path got steeper, Joh had to had drag me up the notine. The air got mustier and moister the farther we went, but the blackness didn't change. The only sounds were our footsteps and their nearby echoes.

The palaway flattened out and began to turn and twist like a serpent

Finally finally there was a brightness around the top and bottom of my brindfold. It wished that it would slip as I was too trightened to plan it off myself. It seemed to me that I wouldn't be so terrified if I could just tee where I was and who was with me.

With the light came noise. Strange noise a low marmaring habble it sounded almost like a waterfall.

The babble got louder as we moved forward, and the closer it got the less it so inded like water. It was too varied, low and high pitches minguage and echoing. If it had not been so discordant, it in ght have sounded like an uglier version of the constant music I'd heard and soing on the Singing World. The darkness of the blindfold stated that memory, the memory of blindness:

Meanie understood the camphony before I did I d never heard

the sound because I'd never been with humans before

It's an argament, she tealized It sounds live so many people arguing.

She was drawn by the sound. Were there more people here, then? That there were even eight had surprised us both. What was this place?

Hanus touched the back of my neck, and I shied away from them "Easy now," Jeb said. He pulled the blindfold off my eves

I blinked slowly and the shindows around musettled into shapes I could understand rough, uneven wals, a pocked ceiling a worn dusty floor. We were underground somewhere in a natural cave for mation. We couldn't be that deep. I thought we'd hiked upward longer than we'd slid downward.

The rock walls and celling were a dark purpley brown and they were riduled with shallow hores like builts cheese. The edges of the lower holes were worn down, but over my head the circles were more

defined and the timms looked sharp

The right came from a round hole ahead of is, its shape not unlike the holes that peppered the cavern but larger. This was an entrance a donrway to a brighter place. Me an e-was eager, fasc nated by the concept of more humans. I held back, suddenly worned that bindness might be better than sight.

Jeb sighed "Surry" he mattered so low that I was certainly the

only one to hear

I trick to swanow and coilld not. My head started to spin, but that might have been from hunger. My hands were trembling like leaves in a stiff breeze as Jeb prodded me. brough the big hole.

The tinnel opened into a chamber so vast that at first I couldn't accept what my eves told me. The celling was too bright and too high a was see an artificial sky I tried to see what brightened it but it sent down sharp lances of light that but! my eves

I was expecting the habble to get lot der but it was abruptly dead quiet in the huge cavern

The floor was d m compared to the brilliant celling so far above. It took a moment for my eyes to make sense of an the shapes.

A crowd. There was no other word for it — there was a crowd of humans standing stock-still and shent, an staring at me with the same huming hate-filled expressions I'd seen at fawn.

Melan e was too stunned to do anything more than count. Ten infects, twenty is twenty five, twenty-six, twenty-seven

I dedn't care how many there were I tried to ted her how little it mattered It wouldn't take twenty of them to kill me. To kill us. I tried to make her set how precartous our position was but she was beyond my warnings at the moment, lost in this human world she dinever dreamed was here.

One man stepped forward from the crowd, and my eyes darked first to us hands boking for the weapon they would carry. His hands were cienched in lists but empty of any other threat. My eyes, adjusting to the dazzang light made out the sun glided that of his skin and then recognized it.

Choking on the sudden hope that dizz ed mc, I feed my eyes to the man's face

Disputed

It was too much for both of us, seeing him here, now after already accepting that we'd never see him again after believing that we'd just him forever it froze me solid made me unable to react. I wanted to look at Unite Jeb, to understand his heartbreaking answer in the desert, but I couldn't move my eyes. I stared at lared's face, uncomprehending.

Melanie reacted differently

"Jared" she cried through my damaged throat the sound was just a croak

She lerked me torward much the same way as she had in the desert, assuming control of my frozen body. The only difference was that this time, it was by force.

I wasn't able to stop her fast enough.

She lurched forward raising my arms to reach out for him. I screamed a warning at her in my head, but she wasn't sten ng to me. She was barely aware that I was even there.

No one tried to stop her as she staggerous means in in. No one hat me. She was within at ches of force top him and still she durit see what I saw. She didn't see how his face had changed in the large norths of separation, how it had hardened how the lines paid of different directions now. She didn't see that the unconscious smile she remembered won a not physically him on this new tike the conce had she seen is face to an dark and daily gerous, and the expression was no him grow the one he were now. She didn't see for maybe she align't gare.

His reach was longer than mine

Before Melanic con dimake my fingers touch him has arm shot not and the back of his hand smashed into the side of militace. The blow was so hard that has feet left the ground before militace stammed, do the rock floor. I heard the rest of my body hit the liftor with will thamps bit lident feel it. My eyes forced back in my head and a ringing sound shimmered in my ears. I tought the wize ness that threatened to spin me unconscious,

Stupia stupid I whimpered a ser I to divide the disabilities

larea shere force that a face of here. She was incorporate chaming the words like they were writes to a song

I tried to locus my eyes but the strange colong was bonding. It wasted my head away from the light and then swallowed a sob as the motion sen daggers of agony through the side of my face.

Leon dibare vibandle, he pain of this line spontaneous blow. What he peldio I have liften furing an intensive leads, ited linslage blooms.

There was a shuttle of leet because melling ever moved insiling to hild the threat and I saw Uncle Joh stand ig over melling had one hand had stretched out inward melbrithe hese a estillooking away. I has sed my bead an inch stifling a jother moan, to see what he saw

fared was walking riward is, and his face was the same as those of the barbarians in the desert — only it was beautiful rather than fright ening in its tury. We heart fallered and then boat uneven y and I wanted to large at myself. Due that they he was beautiful that I aved him when he was going to kill men.

I starge at the murder in his express, in and tried to hope tha large works win our over expediency but a true death wish evalued me

Job and I red socked eves for a long moment, Jurgo k taw conched and unexpehed but Jeti's face was carm. The sclent confron atton

ended when Jared suddenly exhaled in an angry gust and тоок a stepback.

Jeb reached down for my hand and put his other arm around my back to put me up. My head whirled and ached, my stomach heaved. If it hadn't been empty for days. I might have thrown up. It was tike my feet weren't touching the ground. I wobbied and pitched forward. Jeb steadied me and then gripped my clow to keep me standing.

Jared watched all this with a teeth baring grimace. Like an idiot. Melanie struggled to move toward him again. But I was over the shock of seeing him here and iess stupic than she was now. She wouldn't break through again. I locked her away behind every bar I could create in my head.

Just he quiet Can't son see how he wathes me ' Anything you say we make it worse. We're dead

Bu lared's alive lared shere she crouned

The quiet in the cavern dissolved, whispers came from every side a latthe same time as if I dimissed some due I couldn't make out any meanings in the hissing murmurs

My eyes darted amund the mon of humans — every one of them an adult, no smaller younger figure among them. My heart ached at the absence, and Melanie tought to voice the question. I hushed her firmly There wasn't anything to see here, nothing but anger and hatted on strongers, faces, or the anger and hatted on Jared's face.

Intranother man pashed his way through the whispering throng. He was built some and tall his skeletal structure more obvious under his skin than most. His hair was washed out either pale brown or a dark, nondescript blond. Like his bland hair and his long body his features were mind and thin. There was no anger in his take, which was why a held my eye.

The others made way for this apparently unassuming man as if he had some status aming them. (In villared didn't defer to him he held has ground, a aring only at me. The tall man stepped around him not seeming to nonce the obstacle in his path any more than he would a pile of rock.

"Okay okay," he said in an oduly cheery voice as he circled Jared

and came to face me. "I'm here. What have we got?"

It was Aunt Maggie who answered him, appearing at his elbow

"Job found it in the desert. Used to be not mecc Meianie. It seemed to be fulllowing the directions he give her. She flashed a dirty look at Jeb.

"Man has" the tail, bony man as irratred his eyes appraising me currously. It was strange, that appraisal. He looked as if he liked what he saw I couldn't tathom why he would

My gaze shied away from his ito another woman in a young woman who peered around his side her hand testing on his arm in my eyes drawn by her vivid hair.

Sharon! Melanie cried.

Me anie's cousin saw the recognition in my eyes, and her face hard ened.

I pushed Melanie roughly to the back of my head. Shih

"Mun-tim." the tall man said again modding. He reached one hand out to my face and seemed surprised when I recoiled from it, flinching into Jeb's side.

"It's oway" the tall man said, smiling a little in enent ragement. "I won't hurt you."

He reached toward my face again I shrunk into leb's side like before but leb flexed his arm and nudged me forward. The tall man touched my law below my ear, his fingers gentier than I expected and turned my face away. I test his finger trace a line on the back of my neck, and I realized that he was examining the scar from my insertion.

I watched fared's face from the corner of my eye. What this man was doing clearly upset him, and I thought I knew why how he must have hated that siender pink the on my neck.

lared frowned, but I was surprised that some of the anger had drained from his express on. His evebrows pulsed together. It made him look confused

The tail man dropped his hands and stepped away from me. His aps were pursed his eyes alight with some chancinge.

"She looks healthy enough aside from some recent exhaustion, dehydration, and malnourishment. I think you've put enough water back into her so that the dehydration won't interfere. Okay, then "He made an odd, unconscious motion with his hands, as if he were washing them, "Let's get started."

Then his words and his brief examination fit together and I understood - this gentle seeming man who had last promised not to burt me was the doctor.

Uncle jeb sighed heavily and Gosed his eyes.

The doctor held a hand out to me, inviting me to put mine in his I canched my hands into fists behind my back. He looked at me carefully again, appraising the terror in my eyes. His mouth turned down, but I was not a from . He was considering how to proceed

"Ky e Tane" he called, craning his neck to search the assembly for the ones he summoned. My knees wobilled when the two hig black haired brothers pressed their way forward

"I think I need some help. Maybe it you were to carry...." the doc tor, who did not work quite so tall standing beside Kyle, began to say

Everyone turned to see where the dissent had come from I d 3nt need to look because a recognized the voice. I looked at him anyway

Jareu's eyebrows pressed down hard over his eyes. It is mouth was twisted into a strange grimaci. So many emotions ran across his face, it was hard to pin one down. Anger defiance, confusion, hatred. fear ... pain.

The foctor bunked his face going slack with surprise "Jared" Is

there a problem?"

"Yes"

Everyone waited Beside me, Jeb was holding the corners of his a ps down as if they were trying to frinto a grin. It that was the case, then the old man had an odd sense of humor

"And it ise" the doctor asked

Jared answered through his teeth "I'll te you the problem Doc What's the difference between letting you have it or leb putting a bul let in its head?"

1 trembled Jeb patted my arm

The doc or binked again "Well" was all be said.

Jared answered his own question. "The or ference is, if Job kills it at least it dies cleanly."

"Jured." The doctor's voice was soothing, the same tone held used on me. "We teach so much each time. Maybe this will be use t.me —"

"Hah!" Jareu snorred "I don't see much progress being made Doc."

Jones to su protect as Me anie shought faintly

It was hard to concentrate enough to form words. Not u just your body.

Cause enough — Her voice seconed to come from some distance from outside my pounding head.

Sharon took a step forward so that she stood half in front of the doctor. It was a strangely protective stance.

"There's no point all wasting an opportunity," she said hercely. "We all realize that this is hard for you, faced, but in the end it's not your decision to make. We have to consider what's best for the majority."

Jared glowered at her "No" The word was a snarl

I could tell he had not whispered the word, yet it was very quiet in my ears. In fact, everything was suddenly quiet Sharon's lips moved her finger tabbed at fared victously, but a libeard was a soft hissing Norther one of them took a step but they seemed to be drifting away from me.

I saw the dark haited brothers step toward Jared with angry faces. I text my hand try to rise in protest, but it only twitched limply, fared stace turned red when his lips parted, and the tenuous in his neck strained like he was shouting, but I heard nothing. Jeo let go of my annuancial saw the dull gray of the rifle's barrel swing up beside me. I cringed away from the weapon, though it was not pointed in my direction. This upset my balance, and I watched the room tip very slowly to one side.

"Jamle" I sighed as the light swifted away from my eyes.

Jared's face was sudden vivery close, learning over me with a fierce expression.

"Jamier" I breathed again this time a question "Jamier"

Job's gruft voice answered from somewhere far away

"The kild is fine fared brought him here"

I socked at Jarea's former tea face, fast a sappearing into the dark mist that covered my eyes.

"Thank you," I whispered.

And then I was lost in the darkness.

Guarded

hen I came to, there was no d sor entation. I knew exact v where I was rough v speaking, and I kept my eves closed and my breathing even. I tried to learn as much as I could about my exact satisfied without giving away the fact that I was conscious again.

I was hangry. My stomach knotted and clenched and made angry noises. I doubted these noises would be tray me -1 was sure it had gurgled and complained as I slept.

My head ached fiercely. It was impossible to know how much of this was from fat gue and now much was from the knocks I ditaken.

I was a ring on a hard surface. It was rough and — pocked. It was not flat, but odd a curved, as though I was ying in a shallow bowl. It was not comfortable. My back and hips throubed from being curled into this position. That pain was probably what had woken me; I telt for from rested.

It was dark — I could ten that without opering my eyes. Not pitch black, but very dark.

The air was even mistier than before — humid and corroded with a popular scrattoide that seemed to ching to the back of my throat. The temperature was cooler than it had been in the desert, but the incongruents moisture made it a most as uncomfortable. I was sweating again the water leb had given me finding its way out through my pores.

I could hear my breathing ecten back to me from a few feet away. It could be that I was only close to one wall, but I guessed that I was in a very small space. I listened as hard as a could, and it sounded like my breathing echoed back from the other side as we.

Knowing that I was probably still somewhere in the cavern system. Jeb had brought me to I was fairly sure what I would see when I opened by ever I must be in some small hole in the rock durk purple brown and riddled with holes it ke cheese.

It was stient except for the sounds my body made. Afraid to open my eyes, I reced on it years, straining horder and harder against the silence. I couldn't hear anytine else, and his mide no sense. They wouldn't have left me without a warden, would they? I note leb and his own present rifle or someone less sympathetic. To leave me alone—that wouldn't be in character with their britial to, their natural fear and hatred of what I was.

Unless .

I tried to swa low but terror closed my throat. They wouldn't leave me alone. Not unless they thought I was diad, or had made sure that I would be. Not unless there were places in these caves that be one came back from

The picture I d been forming of my surroundings shifted dizzying vin my head. I saw myself now at the bottom of a deep shaft or waited into a cramped tomb. My breathing spediciple tasting the air for staleness for some sign, hat no oxygen was running low. The muscles around my longs pulled outward filling with air for the scream that was on the way. I denoted my teeth to keep it from escaping

Sharp and close something grated across the ground beside my head.

I shricked, and the so and of mas piercing in the small space. My eves flew open. I terked away from the sinister noise, throwing myse to

against a jagged rock wall. My hands swiing up to protect my face as my head it unked paintfully against the low ceiling.

A dam light illuminated the perfectly for not exist to the tany bits be of a cave I was curred in Jareu's face was half at as he leased into the opening one ambiguathing toward me II sups were light with anger A vern in his forchead pulsed as he watched my panicked reaction.

He didn't move the just stared furiously white my heart restarted and my breathing evened out I met his gare, remembering how quet he had always been — like a wraith when he wanted. No wonder I hadn't heard him sitting guard of taide my cell.

But I had heard *something*. As I remembered that Jared shoved his extended arm closer and the grating noise repeated. I looked down. At my feet was a broken sheet of plast a serving as a tray. And on it

I lunged for the open bottle of water. I was barely aware that Jar ed's mouth twisted with dispusitus I jerked the bottle to my ups. I was sure that would bother me later, but all I cared about now was the water. I wondered it ever in my life I would take the liquid for granted again. Given that my life was not likely to be protonged here, the answer was probably no.

ared had disappeared, back through the circular entry. I could see a piece of his sleeve and nothing more. The conclight came from some where beside him. It was an artificial bid shipolar

I'd gulped half the water down when a new scent caught my attention informing melt lat water was not the only gift. I looked down at the tray again.

Food. They were teeding mer

It was the bread — a cark, unevenly shaped roll—that I smelled first, but there was also a bowl of some clear I quid with the tang of omons. As I leaned closer. I could see darker chanks on the bottom Beside this were three stubby white tubes. I guessed they were vegetables, but I didn't recognize the variety.

It took only seconds for me to make these discoveries, but even in that short time, my stomach nearly jumped. Brough my mouth trying to reach the food.

I ripped into the bread. It was very deose studded with whose

grain kernels that caught in my teeth. The cexture was gritty but the flavor was wonderfully right. I couldn't remember anything tasting more decious to me not even my mashed-up. Twinkles. My jaw worked as fast as it could build swallowed most of the incuthfuls of tough bread half chewed. I could hear each mouthful halfing steinach with a gargie. It didn't feel as good as I thought it would. Too long empty, my stomach reacted to the food with a scomfort.

I gnored that and mixed on to the iquid it was some I his well down casier. Aside them the onlone I dishielded the taste was mild. The greenich links were soft and spongy. I drank a straight from the bowl and wished the howl were deeper. I tipped it back to make sure. I'd gotten every drop.

The white vegetables were crunched in texture woody in taste. Some kind of root. They weren't as satis ling as the sorip or as tasty as the oread but I was grateful for their back. I wasn't full innot close and I probably would have started on the tray next if I thought I uibe able to chew through it.

If didn't occur to me until I was finished that they shou unit be feeding me. Not unless Jarco had lost the confrontation with the doc for. Though why would larco be my gillard it that were the case?

I said the tray away when it was empty cringing at the noise it made. I stayed pressed against the back was of my bibble as lared teached in to remeive it. This time he didn't look at the

"Thank you" I whispered as he disappeared again. He said both ing there was no change in his face. Even the bit of his sleeve did not show this time, but I was sure he was liere.

I can't be set o be but me. Me ame mused her thought incredulous rather than resentful. She was not over the surprise of it voi. I had not been surprised in the first place. Of course he had hit me.

I wond med where you wire I answered. It won a or poor manners to get me into the mess and then obtained me

She ignored the sour tone I couldn't have thought be a he after to do it no may or what I a mit think I could be been

sure you and if he disone at you will refle the west you a nave while he same his tre natural, when I remembered her candreams of stranging he Secker. That seemed the months ago, turnigh I knew it was any divisit, would make sense if it had been longer. It ought to take time to get oneself stuck to such a disastrous mire as the one I was in now

Melanie tried to consider it impartially I don't think so Not Jared—and Janue there's no way I could hart Jame, even if he was.

She trailed off having that it is of thought.

I considered this and tound it true. Even if the child had become something or someone else, neither she nor I could ever raise a hand to him.

That's afferent Y in realise — a monther Mothers are realismas here. Too many emotions involved

Monberhouse is acteurs emotioned - even for you some

I didn't answer that

What do you shink is going to happen now .

You're the expert on humans. I rem nded her It's probably not a good thing that they're gaing me food. I can think of only one reason they diment me strong.

The few specifies I remembered of historical human bruta, ties tangled in my head with the stair es in the old newspaper weld read the other day. Fire—that was a bad one. Melanie had burned a lithe fingerprints off herir ght hand once in a stup diacouent granbing a panishe hadn't teal zed was hot. I remembered how the hain had shocked her—it was so unexpectedly sharp and demanding

It was just an accident though. Quickly treated with ce salves medicine No one had come it on purpose continued on from the first sickening pain unawing it out longer and longer.

I dinever lived on a planet where such arroches could happen even being the sours came. This place was truly the highest and the lowest of all worlds—the most headlift, senses the most exquisite emotions—the most malevolent desires, the darkest deeds. Perhaps it was meant to be so. Perhaps without the lows, the highs could not be reached. Were the sours the exception to that rule? Could they have the light without the darkness of this world?

I felt something when he but you Melante interrupted. The words came's owly one by one as it she didn't want to think them.

I fell comething for it was amazing how hatters it was to use sar casm now after spending so much time with Me an e. He sight quite a backhand, doesn't he?

That's not what I mean. I mean. She hesitated for a long moment, and then the rest of the words came in a rush. I thought it was all me—the way we see about him a thought I was—in control of that

The thoughts behind her words were clearer than the words them selves.

You though you were able to bring me here because you wanted it so much. That you were controving me instead of the other way around. I tried not to be annoyed. You shough, you were manipulating me

Yes. The chage n in her tone was not because I was upset, but he cause she did not like being wrong. But

I wanted.

It came in a rush once more You're it sove with him too, separately from me. It feels if fivent from the way I feel. Other I didn't see that up to be was shere with us unto you saw him for she his time. How did that happen? Him does a three then long worm tale in love with a numan being?

Warm?

Sorry. I guess you sort of have limbs

Now really. They're more ake ameninge. And I'm quite a bit conger than three inches when they're extended.

My point is, be's not your species.

My body is human. I to 1 net. While I m at achea to it. I m human, too. And the way you see Jared in your memories. "Wen is all your fault.

She considered that for a moment. She didn't like it much

So if you had gone to Tuesan and gonen a new body, you wouldn, love him anymore now?

I really, really hope that's true

Neither of us was happy with my answer I leaned my head against the top of my knees. Melanie changed the subject

A. least families safe. I know fared would take care of tim. It i had to leave time. I couldn't have left him in better hands. I wish i con a see him.

I'm not asking that I chinged at the thought of the response that request would receive.

At the same time. I yearned to see the boy's face for myself. I wanted to be sure that he was really here really safe. I that they were feeding

him and caring for thin the way Me alt elnever could again. The way I mother to no one wanted to care for him. Did he have sumeone to sing to him at hight? To tell him stones? Would this new langity lared think at little to logs like that? Did he have someone to cord up against when he was frightened?

Do you come they a to tel ran that I in here? Me and asked

Within this beep or hart him? I asked back

Her thought was a whisper I am t know — I with I cental earlier that I kept my promise.

You certainly la. I shook my head amazed. No time can are tout you didn't come back, just like always

Thanks for the. Her voice was faint I couldn't tell if she meant for my words now or it's is meant the bigger picture bringing her here.

I was suddenly exhausted and I chulchee that she was too. Now that my stomach had settled a bit and telt almost haltway full, the rest of my pains were not sharp enough to keep me awake. I has tated before moving, afraid to make any noise but my body wanted to undurl and stretch out. I did so as silently as I could, trying to find a piece of the bubble long enough for me. Finally. I had to stick my feel a most out the rotind opening. I didn't like doing it worked that lared would hear the movement close to him and think I was trying to escape but he didn't react in any way. I polosed the good stoe of my face against my arm, tried to ignore, he way the curve of the floor cramped my spine, and closed my eyes.

I think I slept but it I are it wasn't deep vi The sound of roots eps

was so very far away when I come to a wake

This is no I opened my eves at once. Nothing had changed. I stall could see the dell blue light through the manufacted I smill could not see it fared was outside it. Someone was coming this way in was easy to hear that the footsteps were coming closer. I pured my legs away from the opening, moving as quiet vias I could and cirtled up against the back war again. I would have liked to be able to stand it would have made mented less volucies, more prepared to face what ever was coming. The low ceiling of the cave book elevable barely have allowed me to kneed.

There was a flash of movement outside my prison. I saw part of lared's foot as he rose is entire to his feet.

"Ah Here you are " a man said. The words were so loud after all the empty shence that I ji mped. I recognized the voice. One of the brothers I discount the desert— the one with the machete. Kyle

Jared didn't speak

"We're not going to allow this, Jared." It was a different speaker a more reasonable voice. Probably the votinger brother, Ian. The brothers voices were very similar or they would have been if Kylk weren't always half shouting his tone always twisted with anger. "We've allost somebody — he'l, we've all lost everybody. But this is ridications."

"If you won't let Doc have it, then it's got to die " Kyle added, his voice a growl

"You can't keep it prisoner here," Ian continued "Eventually it will escape and we'll ail be exposed."

Jared didn't speak, but he took one side step that put him directly in front of the opening to my cell.

My heart pumped hard and fas, as I understood what the brothers were saying. Jared had won I was not to be tortured I was not to be killed — not immediately anyway Jared was keeping me prisoner.

It seemed a beautiful word under the circumstances.

I told you be would protect us.

"Don't make this difficult Jareu." said a new male voice I d'dn't recognize. "It has to be done."

lared said nothing.

"We don't want to hurt you, fared. We're an prothers here. But we will it you make us." There was no builf in Kyle's tone. "Move aside."

Igred stood rock still.

My heart started thumping faster than before, terking against my r bs so hard that the hammering disrupted the rhythm of my lungs, made it d fried t to breathe. Me anie was peaped tated with fear, an able to think in coherent words.

They were going to burt him. Those lunatic humans were going to attack one of their own.

"Jared . piesse," Ian said

Jared didn't answer

A heavy footfall a large and the sound of something heavy bitting something sol d. A gaspia choking guirgle

"No "I creek, and leanshed myself through the round hole

Assigned

he large of the rock exit was worn down, but it scraped my pa ms and shins as I scrambled through it. It hart, shift as I was to wrench myse i creet, and my breath laught. My head swam as the blood flowed downward.

I boked for only one thing — where Jared was so that I could pur myself between him and his attackers.

They all stood frozen in place staring at me Jared had not back to the wall, his hands bated into his sand held low. In front of him Kyle was hunched over the tehing his stomach, Ian and a stranger flanked him a few teet back, their mouths open with shock. I took advantage of their stronge. In two long, shaky strates it moved he ween Kyle and Jared.

Kyle was the first to react. I was less than a foot from him, and his primary instinct was to shove me away. His hand struck my shoulder and heaved me toward the floor. Before I could fail something caught my wrist and yanked me back to my teet.

As soon as he realized what he didone lated aropped my wrist like my skin was onzing acid.

"Get back in there" he roared at me. He shoved my shoulder too but it wash t as hard as Kyle's push. It sent me staggering two feet back toward the hole in the wall.

The hole was a black cordic in the narrow hadway. Outside the small prison, the bigger cave looked just the same, only longer and other a tube rather than a bubble. A small lamp — powered by what, I couldn't guess — lit the hadway dumby from the ground. It cast strange shadows on the teathres of the men furning them into scowling monster faces.

I took a step toward them again, turning my back to Jared

"I'm what you want," I said directly to Kyle "Leave him alone"

No one said anything for a long second

"Tricky bugger," Ian finally muttered, eves wide with horror

"I said get back in there" Tared hissed behind me

I urned haltway, not wanting ky e out of my sight. "It's not your duty to protect me at your own expense."

Jared grimaced one hand rising to push me back toward the cell again

I skipped out of the way the motion moved me toward the ones who wanted to kill me

Ian grabbed my arms and pinned them behind me I struggled instructively, but he was very strong. He bent my joints too far back and I gasped.

"Get your hands off her " fared shouted charging.

Kyle calight him and spiin him around into a wrestling hold forch glass neck torward. The other man grabbed one of Jareu's thrashing arms

"Don't hart him"." I screeched. I strained against the hands that imprisoned me

Jaren's free elbow ramined into Kyle's stomach. Kyle gasped and lost his grip. Jared twisted away from his attackers and then lunged back, his his connecting with Kyle's nose. Dark red blood spattered the wall and the lamp.

"Tin shirt, Ian." Kyle yelled. He put his head down and harried into fared, throwing him into the other man.

"No." Jared and I cried at the same moment

lan dropped my arms, and his hands wrapped around my throat choking off my air. I clawed at his hands with my ascress, stabby nails. He gripped me tighter, dragging my teet off the floor.

If hart—the stranguing hands, the sudden panic of my bings it was agony. I writhed more trying to escape the pain than the murdening hands.

Clack, clack

I donly heard the sound once before but I recognized it. So d J everyone else. They all froze Ion with his hands locked hard on my neck.

"Kyle Ian. Brandt back off " Jeb backed

No one moved in list my hands, still it awing, and my feet, twitch ing in the air.

lared suddenly darted under Kyle's not onless arm and sprang at me I saw his fist figure toward my face, and closed my eyes

A loud the ack sounded inches behind my head fan howed, and I dropped to the floor. I crumpled there at a feet, gasping, farevine treated after an angry glance in my direction and went to stand a. Job's elbow.

"You're guests here, boys, and don't forget in " Jeb growled. "I rold you not to go looking for the girl. She's my guest, too, for the moment and I don't take kind y to any of my guests known any of the others."

"Jeb." Ian moaned above me his voice mattled by the hand held to his mouth. "Jeb. This is insane."

"What's your plan?" Eyle demanded this face was smeared with blood a violent macabre sight. But there was no ey dence of pain in his voice only controlled and simmering anger. "We have a right to know. We have to decide whether this place is safe or it as time to move on. So — how long will you keep this taing as your pet? What will you do with it when you're finished playing Code? An of us deserve to know the answers to these questions."

Kyte's extraordinary words echood behind the puse thousing in my head. Keep me as a periodeb had called me his given. Was that another word for prisonery Was it possible that ion humans existed that did not demand a thering deads or my tenture wrong confessions. It so, it was nothing less than a music e.

"Don't have your answers. Kyle " Jeb said. "It's not up to me."

I do bted any other response Job could have given would have confused them more. All four men, Kyle, Ian, the one I didn't know and even Jared stated at him with shock. I still crouched gasping at Ian's feet, wishing there was some way I could climb back into my hole unnoticed.

"Not up to your" Kyle finally echoed, still disbelieving "Who them? If you're thinking of putting it to a vote that's aircrady been done can Brandt and I are the duty designated appointees of the result."

Jeb shook his head - a tight movement that never took his eyes off the man in front of him "It's not up for a vote. This is still my house."

"Who, then?" Kyle shouted

Jeb's eyes finally flickered — to another face and then back to ky e "It's Jared's decision."

Everyone me included, shifted their eyes to stare at Jared

He gaped at leb. just as astonished as the rest, and then his teeth ground together with an audible sound. He threw a glare of pure hate in my direction.

"Jared?" Ryle asked, facing Jeb again "That makes no sense?" He was not in control of himself now almost splittering in rage "He's more brased than anyone else! Why? How can he be rational about this?"

"Jeb, I don't ..." Jared muttered

"She's your responsibility fared." Jeb said in a firm voice. "Lichelp you out of course if there's any more trouble like this, and with keeping track of her and a that But when it comes to making decisions. Justs all yours." He raised one hand when Kyie tried to protest again. "Lorst at it this way. And It somebody for no your jodi on a raid and brought her back here would you want ine or Doc of a vote deciding what we did with here."

"Journs dead," Kyle missed blood spraying off his lips. He glared at me with much the same expression Jared had just used.

"Well if her hody wandered in here, it would still be up to you Would you want it any other way?"

"The majority —"

"Time or one?" Ian muttered under his breach

Jeb gnorest him "It um kelv as it may be somehow this ever hap pens again whoever the body belongs in akes the call Jeb poked the harre of the good teware. Note then serked it a few inches toware the half behind him "Cet on of him I don't want to see you any where around this place again. You se everyone know that this corridor is offernity. No one's got any reason for being here except lared and it I can his omeometic skulking around. I mask tip questions second You got that A Move. Now "I he abbed the good at Kilo again.

I was amazed that the three assassins in media. It stalked back up the harbway in tieven parasing to give one or I in a parting gramace.

I deep a wanted to her eve that he gan in lebs hands was a slitt.

From the histing of J seen him leb had shown every outward appearance of kindness. He hid not force be me once in a blence, he had not even looked at he with receptivable hostility. Now it seemed that he was one of once two people here who beautiful no hat in fared might have fought to keep me a see but it was plain that he was intensely constraint that he was instructed to street about that he expression, was clear hat patriot him wanted this over with the expression, was clear hat patriot him wanted this over with the expression. While I made his a assess fared glowered at hie with disposition every, he if his expression.

However as much as I wanted to be leve that leb was buitting while I was hed the three men. I suppear into the darkness away from me it was obvious there was now as he could be I derithe from he presented Ich mast have been just as used and other as the rest of them. If he had it used that give in he pass a used it to kill not ast he threaten and one are ld have object to hip to wany.

Desperate sinces. Melione whisperred. We can storate he kind in the writer since care of where the times an enumberred species being those is life-or-death.

S. h I der have done hera . toll I was he will

fared was acing Job new one hand he die it is front if him palm on impersionless my a New that the others were gone their books. slamped into a doser stance leb was even granting under his thick beard as though he dienjoyed the standoff at gunpoint. Strange his man

"Please don't put this on me, leb." lared said. "Kyle is right about one thing. I can't make a rational decision."

"No one said you had to decide this second. She's not going anywhere." Jeo glanced down at me still grinning. The eye closest to me. The one Jared couldn't see. closed quickly and opened again. A wink "Not after all the trouble she took to get here. You've got plenty of time to think it through."

"There's nothing to think through Melanie's dead But I can't — I can't — Jeb I can't just — " Jared couldn't seem to finish the sentence

Tell him

I'm not ready to die right this second

"Don't think about it then," Jeb told ham "Maybe you'll figure something out later. Give it some time."

"What are we go up to do with it? We can't keep watch on it tound the clock."

Jeb shook his head. "That's exac h what we're going it have to do for a while. Things will caim down. Even Kyle can't preserve a minderous rage for more than a few weeks."

"A few week." We can't afford to play guard down here for a few weeks. We have other things.

"I know, I know" Jeh a gheu "I ... figure something out "

"And that's only half the problem." Jared looked at me again, a vern in his forehead pulsed. "Where do we keep it? It's not like we have a cell block."

Jeb smiled down at mo. "You're not going to give us any trouble now are you?"

I stared at him mutely

"Jeb." Jared mottered, upset.

"Oh, don't worry about her First of all we'll keep an eye on her Secondly she'd never be able to find her way out of here — she'd wan der amound lost until she ran into somebour. Which wads as to number three she's not that stupic." He rused line thick white eyebrow at

me "Youre not going to go looking for Kyle or the rest of them, are your I don't think any of them are very fond of you."

I just stared wary of his easy, charry tone

"I wish you wouldn't to k to it like that." Jared muttered

"I was raised in a politer time kild. I can't help myself " leb pur one hand on Jared's arm, parting lightly "Look, you've had a full night." Let me take the next watch here. Get some sleep."

Jared seemed about to object, but then he looked at me again and bis-expression hardened

"Whatever you want Jeb And I don't I won't accept responsibility for this thing. Kill it if you think that's best."

I flinched

Jared scowled at my reaction, then turned his back abriptly and wasked the same way the others had gone Jeb watched him go. While he was distracted. I crept back into my hole.

I heard Jeb settle slowly to the ground hearde the opening. He sighed and stretched popping a few joints. After a few minutes he started whistling quietry it was a cheery tune.

I curted myself around my bent knees pressing my back into the farthest recess of the little cell. Tremors started at the small of my back and run up and down my spine. My hands shook, and my teeth chartered soft y together, despite the soggy heat.

"Might as well I e down and get some sleep," Jeb said whether to me or to himself. I wasn't sure: "Tomorrow's bound to be a toughone."

The shivers passed after a time — maybe ball an hour. When they were gone I felt exhausted I decided to take Jeh's advice. Though the floor to tieven more uncomfortable than before I was unconscious in seconds.

٠

The sme I of food woke me. This time I tons groups and disoriented when I opened my eyes. An instructive sense of panic had my hands tremoung again before I was to a conscious.

The same tray sat on the ground beside me identical offerings on it. I could both see and hear leb. He sat in front of the cave in profile.

looking straight ahead down the long round corrupt and whist, ng softly.

Driven by my herce thirst. I sat un and grabbed the open bottle of water

"Morning." Jeb said nocking in my direction.

I troze, my hand on the bothe, until he turned his head and started whistling again.

Only new not quite so desperately thirsty as before, did I notice the odd unpreasant aftertaste to the water. It matched the acrid taste of the girl but it was slightly stronger. The rang largered in my mouth inescapable.

I are quickly this time saving the soup for last. My stomach reacted more happily today accepting the food with better grace. It barely gurgled.

My body had other needs, though now that the loudest ones had been sated. I looked around my dark gramped hose. There weren't a ot of options visible. But I could barely contain my fear at the thought of speaking up and making a request, even of the bizarre but friendly Jeb.

I rocked back and forth, dehating. My hips ached from curving to the bowled shape of the cave.

"Ahem," Jeb said

He was looking at me again, his face a deeper color under the white heir than usual.

"You've been stuck in here for a while" he said. "You need to get out?"

Inodded

"Don't mind a walk myse (His voice was cheerfu. He sprang to his feet with surprising againty.

I crawled to the edge of my hole staring but at him cautiously.

"I'll show you our little was froom" he continued. "Now you should know that we're going to have to go through kind of the main plaza so to speak. Don't worry. I think everyone will have gotten the message by now." I neonsciously, he stroked the length of his gun.

I tried to swarlow. My bladder was so tall it was a constant pain impossible to ignore. But to parade right through the midule of the bive of angry killers? Con do't he past bring me a backet?

He measured the panic in my eyes—watched the way I dutomatically shrank back farther into the hole—and his upsign reed in specializing. Then he turned and started walking down the dark half To low me." he called back not looking to see it I obeyed.

I had one vivid flash of Kyle finding me here done and was after leb before a second passed, scrambling awawards through the opening and then tobbling along on my stiff legs as fast as I could to each up. It felt both horrible and wonderful to stand straight again — the pain was sharp, but the relief was greater.

I was close behind him when we reached the end of the hall dark ness comed through the tail broken oval of the exit. I bestiated, coxing back at the small lamp held aft on the Joor. It was the only light in the dark cave. Was I supposed to bring it?

He heard me stop and turned to peer at me over his shoulder. I nouded toward the light then looked back at him.

"Leave it I know my way." He held out his free hand to me "I ...
guide you."

I stared at the hand for a long moment, and then feeling the urgency in my bradder. I slowly t at my hand on his palm, barely touching it—the way I would have roughed a snake if for some reason I was ever forced to.

Jeb led me through the blackness with sare quick steps. The ong tunne, was to nived by a series of bewindering twists in apposing a rections. As we rounded yet another sharp V in the path. I knew I was hopeless, a turned around I was sure this was on purpose, and the reason Jeb had left the amp behind. He wouldn't want me knowing too much about how to find my way out of this laborinth.

I was curious as to how this place had come to be how leb had found to and how the others had wound up here. But I forced my lips tightly together. It seemed to me that keeping strent was my best bet now. What I was hoping for I wasn't sure. A tew more days of lifer Just a cessation of pain? Was there anything else left? All I knew was that I wasn't ready to die as a dirold Metan elbefore, my survival in stanct was every on as developed as the average human's

We to med another corner, and the first light reached us. Ahead, a tall narrow crevice glowed with light from another room. This light

was not artific allake the ar a samp by my cave. It was too white too pure

We couldn't move through the narrow tracture in the rock side by side icb wint first towing me close behind is lince through — and able to see again — I pilled my hand out of lebis light grip life didn't react in ally way except to put his newly freed hand back on the gun

We were in a short tunnel and a brighter—g, r shone through a mugh arched doorway. The walls were the same holey purple rock

I could bear voices now They were low less rigent than the last time I diheard the babt le of a human crowd. No one was expecting us today I could only imagine what the response would be to my appearance with Jeb. My palms were cold and wet my breath came in shallow gasps. I leaned as close as I could to Jeb without actually touching but.

"Easy" he marm, red, nor tarning. "They re more atract of you than you are of them."

I doubted that And even it there were any way that it could be true tear turned into harred and violence in the human heart

I won't let anybody hurt you." Ich mombled as ite reached the archway. "Anyway, might as well get used to this."

I wanted to ask what that meant, but he stepped through into the next room. I crep in after him had a step behind, weeping myse thicken by his body as much as possible. The only thing harder than trucking myself forward into that room was the thought of failing behind leb and being eaugh, along here.

Sudden silence greeted our entrance

We were in the gigant of bright cavern again, the one they differ brought me to How long ago was that? I had no dea. The celling was still too bright for me to make out exactly how it was in I hadn't noticed before but he wais were not unbroken. Jozens of irregular gaps opened to adjoining tinness. Some of the openings were huge, others barely large enough for a man to fit through stooped over some were natural crevices, others were if not than made at least enhanced by someone's hands.

Several people stated acts from the recesses of those crevices itrozen in the act of coming in going. More people were out in the open their bodies caright in the middle of whatever movement our entrance had interrupted. One with many was bent in half-reaching for het sittle laces. A many mot onless arms hang in the air-raised to illustrate some point he dibeen making to his companions. Another man wob-bled, caught off balance in a sudden's op. His outcome down hard as he struggled to keep steady the third of its fail was the only sound in the vast space. It echoed through the room.

It was fundamentally wrong for motorite grantful to hat hideous weapon in Jeb's hands—but I d d I knew that althout it we would probably have ocen attacked. These humans would not stop themselves from harting Jeb d'il meant they could get to me. Though we might be attacked despite the gan Jeb could care shout one of them at a time.

The picture in my head had turned so grish that I couldn't bear it. I tried to too as an my immediate surroundings, which were padenough.

leb paused for a moment, the gun hear at his wrist, pointing out ward. He stared all around the room, seeming to nek his gaze, one by one with each person in it. There were tewer than twenty here, it did not take long. When he was satisfied with his sludy he headed for the left wall of the cavern. Blood thindding in my ears. I tollowed in his shadow.

He did not walk directly across the cavern, instead keeping close to the curve of the wall. I wondered at his path until I noticed a large square of darker ground that took up the cenier of the faior. I a very large space. No one stood on this darker ground I was too frightened to do more than notice the altimally. I didn't even guess at a reason.

There were small movements as we direct the silent room. The bending woman straightened it wishing at the waist to waich as go. The gesturing man holded his arms across his cliest. All eves harrowed and all faces hightened into expressions of rage. However, no one moved toward as, and no one spoke. Whatever, ky, and the others had fold these people about their controllation with Jeb. it seemed to have had the effect. Jeb was hoping for

As we passed through the grove of human statues. I recognized Sharon and Maggie evering as from the wide month of one opening. Their expressions were black their eyes cold. They did not look at me, only Jeb. He ignored them

It felt like years later when we finally reached the far side of the covern leb headed for a midium sized exit is ack against the bright ness of this room. The eves on my back made my scalp tingle but I didn't dare to look behind me. The humans were still sitent but I wor tied that they might to low. It was a relief to slip into the darkness of the new passageway leb's hand touched by elbow to guide me, and I did not shrink away from it. The habble of voices didn't plik up again behind us.

"That went better than I expected." Jeb militered as he steered me through the cave. His words surprised me, and I was good I didn't know what he a thought would happen.

The ground sloped downward under my feet. Ahead, a d m light kept me from total blindness.

"Bet you've never seen anything like my place here." Jeb's voice was rouder now back to the charty tone he dissed before. "It's really something, isn't #?"

He paused briefly in case I might respond and then went on

"Found this place back in the seventres. Well it found me. I fell through the root of the big riform. probably should a died from the fall but I m too to light for my own good. Took me a while to find a way ou. I was hangey enough to eat rick by the time I managed it.

"I was the only one left on the ranch by then so I didn't have anyone to show it to I explored every nook and cranny, and I could see the possibilities. I decided this might be a good card to keep up my sleeve just in case. I have how we Stryders are the like to be prepared."

We passed the dimilight in came from a fist sized hole in the ceing, making a small circle of brightness on the floor. When it was behind as I could see another spot of manination far ahead.

"You're probably curious as to how this all got here." Another pause shorter than he last "I knew I was. I did a little research. These are avaitables. Lan you beat that? This used to be a voicano. Well, still is a voicano. I expect. Not quite head as you'll see in a bit. Anothese caves and holes are bubbles of air thin got laught in the cooling lava. I velp it quite a bit of work into it over the last tew hecades. Some of a was easy—connecting the tubes rist look a little clook.

grease Other parts took more imagination. Did you see the ceiling in the big room? That took me years to get right."

I wanted to ask him how but I couldn't bring myse t to speak Sillence was safest

The floor began to stant downward at a steeper angle. The terrain was broken into rough steps, but they seemed secure enough. Jeb led me down them confidently. As we dropped tower and lower into the ground, the heat and humidity increased.

I stiftened when I heard a babble of voices again this time from ahead. Jeb patted my hand kindly

"You II a ke this part — it's a ways everyone's favorite," he promised.

A wide open arch shimmered with moving light. It was the same color as the light in the big room, pure and white but it flickered at a strange dancing pace. Like everything else that I couldn't understand in this cavern, the light frightened me.

Here we are " Jeb said enthusiastically pulling me through the archway. "What do you think?"

Visited

he heat but me first. Like a wall of steam, the moist, thick air so led over me and dewed on my skin. My mouth opened automatically as I tried to pull a breath from the absorbtly denser air. The smell was stronger than before. That same metal ic tang that ching in my throat and flavored the water here.

The marm ring babble of bass and soprano voices seemed to issue from every side, echoing off the walls. I squanted anxiously through the swirling cloud of moisture litting to make out where the voices came from it was bright here—the ceiling was dazzing like in the big room but much closer. The light danced off the vapor creating a shimmering curtain that almost blinded me. My eyes struggled to adjust, and I clutched at Joh's hand in panic.

I was surprised that the strangely fluid baboie did not respond in any way to our entrance. Perhaps they couldn't see us yet, either

"Lis a bit close in here" Jeb said apologetically fanning at the steam in front of his face. His voice was relaxed, conversational in

tone and lead enough to make melit mp. He speke as if we were not surrounced. And the bubble continued on vious to his voice.

"Not that I'm complaining" he continued "I dibe dead severatimes over it this place didn't exist. The very first lime I got stack in the caves, of course. And now we'd never be able to hide out here without it. With no hiding place, we're all dead if ght?"

He maged me with his e bow a conspirator al gesture

"Mighty convenient, how it is laid out. Couldn't have planned it much better if I i sculpted it myself out of play dough."

If so augh cleared a section of miscond I saw the room for the first time.

the charter that it was my ears—the water gashing over and analythe purple volcanic rock. Ten spoke as it we were a one because we were

It was really only one over and one small stream. The stream was consest a shallow braided ribbon of silver in the "phi from above coursing between low stane banks, but it seemed constantly in danger of overraining. A temining high priched material purred from its gentle ripples.

The maje bassing rigid came from the river as did the thick clouds of vapiritial rose from the gaping holds in the ground by the far wall the river was brack subnierged under the allocator the cavernie exposed by white round crossons along the length of the room. The holds tooked dark and dangerous, the river berely visible as it rushou power fully roward an invisible and and anta-homable destination. The water seemed to sammer such was the hear and steam it produced. The sound of a root was ake that of boring water.

From the ceiling hang a lew long, narrow stalketness dripping toward the stalket tes beneath each one. Three of them had met torming thin black process between the two bodies of their ng water.

"Got to be careful in here" Jeh said. "Quite a current in the hot spring. It you fall in voture gone. Happened once be ore." He bowed his read at the memory, his face sober.

The swift black educes at the subterranean river were suddenly torrible to me. I magned being caught in their scalding current and shuddered

geb put his hand lightly on my shoulder. "Don't worry last watch your step and you, be fine. Now "he said pointing to the far end of the cavern, where the shallow stream ran into a dark cave, "the first cave back there is the bathing room. We've dug the floor out to make a nice, deep tub. There is a schedule for taking baths, but privacy is not usually an issue. It is back as pitch. The rooms nice and warm so chose to the steam, but the water won't burn you like the hot spring here. There's another cave just past that one, through a crevice. We've wildened the entrance up to a comfortable size. That room is the far thest, we can follow the stream. It drops underground there. So we've got that room fixed a plan the atrible Convenient and sandary." His voice had assumed a complacent tone as it he felt credit was due to him for natives creations. We he had discovered and improved the place. I supposed some pride was a stiffed.

"We don't like to waste batteries and most of as knew the floor here by heart but since it's your first time you can find your way with this."

Jeb pulled a flashlight from his pocket and he is most. The sight of tirem nided the of the moment held found me dving in the desert, when held checked my eyes and known what I was, a sidn't know why the memory made me sad.

'Don't get any crazy lideas about maybe the river taking you out of here or something. Once that water goes underground, it doesn't come back up," he cautioned me.

Since he seemed to be waiting for some acknowledgment of his warning. I nodded once I took the flishlight from his hand slowly being eareful not to make any quick movements that might startle him.

He amued in encouragement.

I followed his directions quickly—the sound of the mishing water was not making my discomfort any easier to bear. It felt very strange to be out of his sight. What if someone had hidden in these caves guessing I would have to come here eventually? Would leb hear the struggle over the cacophony of the rivers?

I shone the flash ight all ground the bathing room, looking for any sign of an ambush. The odd flickering stadows it made were not comforting but I found no substance to my fears. Jeb's jub was

more the size of a small swimming poor and brack as ink. Under the surface, a person would be invisible as long as they could hold their breath. I harmed through the slender track at the back of the room to escape my imaginings. Away from Jeb. I was nearly overwhe med with panic. I couldn't breathe normally. I could barely hear over the sound of my pulse racing both oil my ears. I was more running than walking when I made my way back to the room with the rivers.

To find Job standing there still in the same pose still alone, was like a balm to my spiritered nerves. My breat, ang and my heartheat slowed. Why this crazy human should be such a comfort to me. I couldn't understand. I supposed it was like Me ame had said. Jesperate times

"Not too shabby, ehr" he asked a grin of pride on his face. I node ad once again and returned the flashlight

"These caves are a great gift." he said as we started back toward the dark passageway. "We wouldn't be able to survive in a group, ke this without them. Magnot a and Sharon were getting along real well shocking y well — up there in Chicago, but they were pushing their uck in ding two. It's mighty nice to have a community again. Makes me feel downright human."

He took my elhow once more as we clumbed the rough start case out.

"Im sorry about the um accommodations we've got you in It was the safest place I hold hink of Im surprised those boys tound you as quick as they did "Job sighed. "We I Kyle gets real improvated But I suppose it's a for the best Might as well get used to how things are going to be. Maybe we can find something more hospitable for you. In think on it. While I'm with you at least you don't really have to cram yourself toto that this hole. You can sit in the half with me it you preter. Though with lared. "He trailed off."

Histened to his apologetic words in wonder, this was so much more kindness than I dibought this species was capable of giving their enemies. I patted the hand on my elbow lightly besitantly trying to convey that I understood and wouldn't cause a problem. I was sure Jared much preferred to have me out of sight.

Jeb had no trouble translating my workless communication. "That's

a good gire," he said. "We is figure this all our somehow. Doc can just concentrate on health human folks. You're much more interesting alive, I think."

Our hordes were close enough that he was able to fee me tremble

"Don't warry. Doe's not going to bother you now."

I couldn't step shivering Jeh could only promise me note. There was no grarontee that lared would not decide my secret was more amportant than protecting Malanies body. I knew that such a tate would make me wish I in had succeeded last night. I swand wed feel if pithe bruising that seemed to go all the way through my neck to the inside walls of my throat.

You never know both much and you a have. Melanie had said so many days ago, when my world was still under control.

Ifter words echoed in my head as we reentered the big room, the main plaza of Joh's hitman community. It was full like the first night, everyone, here to glare at its with eves that hiazed anger and betrayal when they looked at him and murder when they looked at me. I kept my gaze down on the rock under my feet. From the corner of my eye I could see that Jeb he whis gun ready again.

It was inly a matter of time indeed. I could feel it in the atmosphere of lists and tear. Jeo could not protect mellong.

It was a relief to scrape back through the narrow crevice to look torward to the writing black labyrinth and my cramped hiding place I could hope to be alone there.

Behind me is furneus hissing, like a nest of goaded snakes, echoed in the big cavern. The sound made me wish Jeb would lead me through the labyrinth at a quicker pace.

Ica chack ed inder his breath. He seemed to get stranger the longer I was around him. His sense of humor myst fied me as much as his motivations did.

"It gets a bit technis down here sometimes you know" he must mured to me or to himse f. With left it was hard to relu. "Maybe when they get over being theesed off at me they remare they approvate an the excitement I'm providing."

Our path torough the dark twisted in a scripentine fashion. It

dign't teet at an tama ar. Perhaps he took a different route to keep me lost. It seemed to take more time than before, but heathy, could see the dim blue. got of the lamp shining from around the next curve.

I braced myself windering if lared would be there again. If he was, I know he would be angry. I was sure he wouldn't approve of leb taking me for a field trip no matter how necessary it might have been.

As soon as we rounded the corner I could see that there was a ngure sampled against the wan beside the amplicasting a long shadow toward us, but it was obviously not Jaren. My hand cluttured at Jeb's arm, an automatic spasm of fear

And then I ready looked at the waiting figure. It was smaller than me — that was how I dignown it was not Jared—and thin "Small but also too tall and too wity. Even in the dim "ight of the blue amp. I could see that his skim was used to a deep brown by the sun, and that his sixty black hair now tell unknown bast his chin.

My knees buckled.

Ms hand grasping Jeb's arm it participle don for support

"We, for Pete's sake "Jeb exclaimed obvious virintated. 'Can't nobouv keep a secret around this place for more'n twenty it an hours?' Call durn this be misime up! Bunch of gossipmonairs. "He trailed off into a grumble."

I didn't even try to understand the words leb was saving. I was socked in the hercest battle of my life — of every life I diever lifed

I could feel Melanie in each cold at my body. My nerve endings engled in recogn from at her familiar presence. My most es twitched in anadipation of her direction. My and trembled trying to open. I leated forward toward the boy in the half my body reaching because my arms would not.

Me and 1 od learned many things the few times 1 diceded or lost my command to her and I truly had to struggle against her — so hard that tresh swear beaded on my brow. But I was not dying in the desert new Nor was I weak and dizzy and taken off guard by the appearance of someone I'd given up for lost 1 diknown this moment might turne. My body was resilient quick to hea — I was strong

again. The strength of my body gave strength to my control to my determination.

I drove her item my ambs, chased her from every hold she diffund the stiller back and the recesses or my mind, and chained her shere

Her surrender was sauden and tota. Auab she supped and it was almost a moan of pain.

I telt strangely grafty as soon as I d won.

I dialready known that she was more to me han a resistant host who made life unnecessarily difficult. We dibecome companions ever confidences during our past weeks logother—ever since the Seeker had united us agains a common enemy. In the desert with Kyles known over my head. I a been good that it I had to die I would not be the one to kill Melanie even then, she was more than a body to me. But now it seemed like something beyond that I regretted causing her pain.

It was necessary though and she didn't seem to grasp that Any word we said wrong any poorly considered act on would nean a quick execution. Her reactions were too wild and emotional. She would get us into trouble

You have to trust me now. I told her a mount triving to keep us aim. I know some don't want to become your humans come burt as

But it v lam e she whispered. She yearned for the box with an emotion so strong that it weakened my knees again.

I tried to look at him imparitally—this size enfaced teenager shimped against the tunnel wazewith his arms tolded tightly across his chest. I tried to see him as a stranger and plan my response or lack of response accordingly. I tried but I tailed He was lamie he was beaut told any arms—more nor Melanie's—enged to hold him. Tears hied my eyes and included down my tace. I could only hope they were invisible in the dim light.

"Jeb." Jam e said — a gruff greeting. His eves passed switch over me and away.

His voice was so deep! Could be really be so one? I realized with a double pany of a litthat I direct missed his four centh birthday. Me ante showed me the circumantal saw that it was the same day as the first dream with Jamie. She districtly ed so hard a lithrough the waking hours to keep her pain to herself to cloud her memories in order to

protect the boy, that he'd come out in her dream. And I'dic mailed the Seeker.

I shudgered now in disbellef that I diever been so callous

"Whatcha doing here ix de" Jeb demanded.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Jamie demanded back.

Jeb went shent.

"Was that Jared's idea?" Jamie pressed

Jeb sighed "Okay, so you know What good does that do you, eh? We only wanted to —"

"To protect me?" he interrupted, surly

When did he get so bitter? Was it my facit? Of course it was.

Melanic began sobbing in my head. It was distracting, loud in made Job and Jamie's voices sound farther away.

"Fine, Jamie: So you don't need protecting. What do you wante"

This quick capitular on seemed to throw Jamie off. His eyes darred between Jeb's face and mine while he struggled to come up with a request.

"I - I want to talk with her with it," he finally said. His voice was higher when he was unsure.

"She doesn't say much " Jeb told him, "but you're we come to try lad."

Jeb pried my fingers off his arm. When he was free he turned his back to the nearest wait teaming into it as he eased himself to the floor. He settled in here, fidgeting until he found a comfortable position. The gun stayed ha anced in the cradle of his lap Jeb's head folled back against the wall and his eyes closed. In seconds, he looked like he was askeep.

I stood where he d lett me, trying to keep my eyes off Jamie's face and faring

Jamie was surprised again by Jeb's easy augutescence. He watched the old man recline on the floor with wide eyes that made him look younger. After a few minutes of perfect strings from Jeb. Jamie looked back up at me, and his eyes tightened.

The way he stared at me — angry, trying hard to be brave and grown up but also showing the fear and pain so clearly in his cark eyes— had Melanie sobbing fouder and my knees shaking. Rather than take a chance with another collapse I moved slowly to the tunnel

wall across from Jeb and slid down to the floor I curied ip around my bent legs, trying to be as small as possible

James watched me with eautious eyes and then took four slow steps forward until he stood over me. His glance flitted to Job, who hadn't moved or opened his eyes, and then famic kne't down at my side. His face was suducibly intense, and it made him look more adult than any expression yet. My heart throubted for the sad man in the little boy's face.

"You're not Melanic." he said in a low voice

It was harder not to speak to him because I was the one who wanted to speak. Instead, after a brief hesitation. I shook my head

"You're uside her body, though."

Another pause, and I nodded.

"What happened to your — to her face?"

I shrugged I diunt know what my face looked like, but I could imagine.

"Who did this to your" he pressed. With a heatant finger, he a most touched the side of my neck. I held still feeling no urge to or nge away from this hand.

"Aun. Maggie Jared and Ian," Jeb risted off in a bored voice. We both tamped at the sound. Jeb hadn't moved, and his eyes were stall closed. He looked so peacetal as if he had answered Jamie's question in his sleep.

Jamic waited for a moment, then turned back to me with the same intense expression

"You're not Melanic, but you know all her memories and stuff, righte"

I nodded again

"Do you know who I am?"

arted to swallow the words but they supped through my ups. "You're Jamie" I couldn't be p how my voice wrapped around the name like a caress.

He blinked startled that I had broken my stlence. Then he nodded, "Right," he whispered back.

We both looked at Jeb, who remained still and back at each other. "Then you remember what happened to here" he asked.

I winced, and then nodded slowly

"I want to know," he whispered

I shook my head.

"I want to know" Jamie repeated. His aps trembled. "I in not a sid. Tell me."

"It's not pleasant" I breatiled unable to stop myself. It was very hard to dony this boy what he wanled

This straight black evebrows pulled together and up to the midule over his wide eyes. "Please." he whispered.

a glanced at Jeb. I though, that maybe he was pecking from between his lashes now but I couldn't be sure

My voice was soft as breathing, "Someone saw her go into a piace that was off, mits. They knew something was wrong. They caused the Seekers."

He flinched at the title

"The Seekers tried to get her to surrender. She ran from them When they had her cornered, she jumped into an open elevator shaft."

I recould from the memory of pain and Jamie's face went white under his tan

"Sne didn't die?" he whispered.

"No. We have very skilled Heaters. They mended her quickly Then they put me in her. They noped I would be able to tell them how she had survived so long." I had not meant to say so much my mouth snapped shull Jamie didn't seem to not ce my slip, but Jeb's eyes opened slowly and fixed on my face. No other part of him moved, and Jamie didn't see the change.

"Why didn't you let her user" he asked. He had to swallow hard a sob was threatening in his your. This was all the more paintful to hear because it was not the sound a child makes frightened of the unknown but the first comprehending agony of an addit. It was so hard not to reach out and put my hand on his cheek. I wanted to hugh mit o me and beginn not to be sad. I carled my hands into fists and tried to concentrate on his question. Jeb's eves flickered to my hands and back to my face.

"I wasn't monthe decision" I marmared "I was still main berna

from tank in deep space when that happened "

Jamie bilnked again in surprise. My answer was nothing held ex-

pected, and I could see him struggling with some new emotion. I glanced at Joh, his eyes were bright with corrosity

The same curiosity, though more wary, won out with Jamie "Where were you coming from?" he asked

In space of myself. I smiled at his unwilling interest. "Far away. Another planet."

"What was "he started to ask, but he was interrupted by an other question.

"What the hell?" Jared shoured at as trozen with fury in the act of rounding the corner at the end of the tunne. "Damn it Jeb We agreed not to —"

Jamie wrenched himself upright. "Jeb dannt bring me here. But you should have,"

Jeb sighed and got slowly to his feet. As he did so, the gun roued from his lap onto the floor. It stopped only a few inches from me. I scooted away, uncomfortable.

ared had a different readion. He langed toward me closing the length of the hallway in a few funning strates. I cowered into the wall and covered my face with my arms. Peeking around my elbow. I walched him look the gun up from the floor.

"Are you trying to get us killed?" he almost screamed at Job, showing the gun into the old man's chest

"Caim down, Jared," Jeo said in a tired voice. He mok the gun in one hand. "She wouldn't touch this thing if I left it down here alone with her all night. Can't you see that?" He stabbed the barrel of the gun toward me and I emiged away. "She's no Seeker, this one."

"Shut up, Jeb, just shut up"

"Leave him alone" Jamle shouted. "He didn't do anything wrong,"

"You!" Jarea shouted back turning on the slim langry figure. "You get out of here now, or so help me."

Jamie bailed his fists and stood his ground.

Jared's fista came up, too.

I was rooted in place with shock. How could they setterm at each other this way? They were family the bonds between them stronger than any blood tie, lared wouldn't hit famile. He couldn't I wanted

to do something but I didn't know what to do. Anything that brought me to their attention would only make them anguer

For once Melanie was calmer than I was He can't burt Jamie she thought confidently. It's not possible

I looked at them, facing off like enemies, and panicked.

We should never have come here See how unhappy we've mode them. I mounted

"You shou do t have tried to keep this a secret from me," Jamie said between his teeth. "And you shouldn't have hart fer." One of his hands undenched and flew out to point at my take.

Jared spit on the floor. "That's not Melanie. She's never coming back, Jamie."

"That's her face " Jamle insisted "And her neck. Don't the bruises there boilber you?"

Jared dropped his hands. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath "You will either leave right now James and give me some space, or I will niake you leave I am not builfing I can't deal with any more right now, okay? I'm at my limit. So can we please have this conversation ater?" He opened his eyes again, they were full of pain

Jam'e looked at him, and the anger dramed slowly from his face "Sorry," he muttered after a moment. "I'll go but I'm not promising that I won't come back."

"I can't think about that now Go. Please"

Jamie shrugged. He threw one more searching look at me and then he lett, his quick long stride making me ache again for the time I'd missed.

Jared looked at Job "You too" he said in a flat voice

leb rolled his eves "I don't think you've had a long enough break, to be honest. I'l keep an eye on "

"Go."

Jeb frowned thoughtfully "Okay Sure" He started down the

"Jeb?" Jared called after him

"Yeah?"

"If I asked you to shoot it right now would you die to."

Jeb kept walking slowly not looking at a subut his words were clear.

"I'd have to. I follow my own rules. So don't ask me injess you really mean it."

He disappeared into the dark

Jared watched him go. Bet we he could turn his ginwer on me. I ducked into my uncomfortable sanctuary and curied up in the back corner.

Bored

spent the rest of the day with one brief exception in total silence.

That exception occurred when Jeb brought food for both Jared and me several hours later. As he set, he tray inside the entrance to my tany cave, he smalled at me apologotically.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"You're welcome," he told me.

I heard Jared grant armtated by our small exchange

That was the only sound Jared made an day. I was sure he was out there but there was never so much as an audible breath to confirm that conviction

It was a very long day—very champed and very dai. I med every position I could imagine but I could never quite manage to get all of me stretched out comfortably at once. The small of my back began a steady throbbing.

Melanic and I thought a lot about Jamie. Most viwe worried that we had damaged him by coming here, that we were injuring aim now. What was a kept promise in comparison with that?

That lost meaning Ir could have been sunset it could have been dawn. I had no references here, borted in the earth. Melanie and I ran out of topics for discussion. We flypped through our mint memories apathetically, like switching TV channe's without stopping to watch anything in particular. I napped once but could not fall soundly as eep because I was so uncomfortable

When Job hinally came back I doubt have kissed his leathery face He seased into my cell with a grin stretching his cheeks

" Bout time for another walke" he asked me

I nodded eagerly.

"I'll do it " faced growled. "Give me the gun."

I hesitated crouched awkward van the mour for my cave until Job nodded at me-

"Go ahead." he told me.

I climbed out stiff and unsteady and took Job's offered hand to ba ance myself. Jaren made a sound of revulsion and turned his face. away. He was ho dong the gan rightly his knuckles white over the barrel. I didn't like to see it in his hands. It bothered one more than it did with Jeb.

Jared die it make allowances for me the way Jeb had. He stalked off into the black lanner without pausing for me to eatch up

It was hard the diant make much noise and he didn't guide me so I had to walk with one hand in front of my face and one hand on the wall, trying not to run into the rock. I tell twice on the aneven floor. Though he did not help me, he did want till he could hear that I was on my feet again to continue. Once, harrying through a straighter section of the tube. I got took ose and my searching hand touched his back, traced across the shape of his shoulders, before I realized that I hadn't reached another wall. He timped ahead, jerking out from under my fingers with an angry hiss.

"Sorry "I whispered feeling my cheeks turn warm in the darkness. He widn't respond but sped his pace so that following was even more difficult.

I was confused when, finally some light appeared ahead of me Had we taken a different route. This was not the white buildance of the biggest cavern I was no ted, pale and silvery. But the narrow crevice we'd had to pass through seemed the same. It wasn't until

I was inside the grant lechoing space that I realized what can sed the difference.

It was night melithe light that shone aims, from above mimicked the light of the moon rather than the sun. I used the less blinding if am nation to examine the celling, trying to fetret out its secret. High so very high above melia handred tiny moons shone their diluted light toward the aim distant floor. The little moons were scattered in patternless clusters, some farther away than others. I shook my head Even though I could look directly at the light now. I still aidn't under stand it.

"C mon." Jared ordered angrily from several paces whead

I finched and burried to follow I was sorry I'd let my attention wanter I chald see how much it irritated him to have to speak to me.

I don't expect the help of a flash ight when we reached the room with the rivers and I dun't receive it. It was don't at now too, I ke the big cave, but with only twenty odd in plature moons here. Jared clenched has aw and stated at the certing while I walked hesitantly into the room with the linky pool. I guessed that if I stambled into the ficice underground hot spring and disappeared. Jared would probably see it as a kind intervention of fate.

I show he would be sait. Melanie disagreed as I edged my way around the black bathing room, hugging the wall. If we ten

I doubt it. He is ght be reminied of the pain of losing you the first time but he teotic he happent I accurage area.

Because he doesn't know you. Melanie whispered and then taded away as it she were suddenly exhausted.

I stood trozen where I was, surprised I wasn't sure but it felt as though Me anie had just given me a compliment.

"Move it." lated barked from the other room

I harmed as fast as the darkness and my fear would a low

When we returned Jeb was waiting by the bise lamp, at his feet were two unity or inders and two uneven recrangles. I have a not ced them before. Perhaps he il gone to get their while we were away.

Are you sleeping here ronight or am 12" Jeb asked Jared in a casual tone

Tared looked at the shapes by leb's leet

"I am " he answered corrly "And I only need the bedror"

Jeb raised a thick eyebrow

"It's not one of us. Jeb. You left this on me ... so but out."

"She's not an animal, either kid. And you wo idn't treat a dog this way."

lared didn answer. His teeth ground together

"Never figured you for a cruel man" leb said sort it. But he picked up one of the cylinders put his arm through a strap, and slung it over his shoulder then stuffed one rectangle. It a pillow in dering arm

"Sorry honey" he said as he passed me pa ring my shoulder

"Cut that out!" Jared growled

Jeb shri gged and amoied away. Before he was out of sight. I har ried to disappear into my ce. I hid in a sidarkest reaches, coiling myself into a tight ball that I hoped was too small to see

Instead of arking's and vand inventible in the outside tunnel, Jared spread his bearon directly in front of the mouth of my prison. He plumped his paliew a few times, possibly trying to rab it in that he had one. He lay down on the mall and crossed his arms over his chest. That was the piece of him that I could see through the hole. List his crossed arms and half of his stomach.

His skip was that same dark good ran that had haunted my dreams for the last half year. It was very strange to have that piece of my dream nisolal reality not five feet from me. Surreal

"You won't be able to sneak past me" he warned. His voice was softer than before — sleepy. "If you try..." He yawned. "Laull K... you."

I didn't respond. The warning struck me as a bit of an insult. Why would I try to sneak past him? Where would I go? I to the hands of the barbarians out there waiting for me all of them wishing that I would make exactly that kind of stup diatempt? Or supposing I inted somehow sneak past, hem, back out into the desert that had nearly baked me to death the last time I difficulto cross it? I wondered what he thought me capable of What plan did held his I was faithing to overthrow the rittle world? Did I really seem so powerthis? Washing to clear how pat, etically delense ess I was?

I could tell when he was deeply asleep because he started twitching the way Melanic remembered he occasionally did. He of ly slept so testless viwhen he was upset. I waiched his tingers cierca and un-

ciench, and I wondered if he was dreaming that they were wrapped around my neck.

٠

The days that to lowed — perhaps a week of them, It was impossible to keep track — were very quiet fared was like a sucht wall between me and every hing else in the world good or bod. There was no sound but that nt my own breathing my own movements, there were no sights but the black cave around he the circle of dull light, the famular tray with the same rations, the brief stolen glimpses of fared, there were no to, thesout the pitted rocks against my skin, there were no tastes but the bitter water, the hard aread, the biand soup, the woody toots, overland over again.

It was a very strange combination constant terror persistent aching physical discomfort and excrue ating monotony. Of the three, the killer boredom was the hardest to take. My prison was a sensory-deprivation chamber.

Together Melanie and I worried that we were going to go mad We both bear a voice in our bead, she pointed out. That i never a good sign

We re going to targe, how to speak, I worned. How long has it need since anyone talked to us?

Four days ago you thanked leb for bringing so food and he said you were a e-come. Well, I think it was four days ago. Four long sceeps ago, at least. She seemed to sight, Stop cheating your noils. — It took me years to break that habit.

But the long, scratchy hails bothered me I dent reads think we need to werry about had bab; s in the long term

Jared didn't let leb oring food again. Instead, someone broug, the to the end of the hall and lared retrieved it. I got the same thing bread some and vegetables — twice every day. Sometimes there were extra things for Jared packaged foods with brand names. I recognized. Red Vines, Shickers, Pop Tarts, I fined to imagine how the humans had gotten their hands on these delicacies.

I didn't expect him to share - of course not - but I wondered sometimes if he indught I was hoping he would. One of my lew enter to nments was hearing him eat his treats, because he always did so

osten attously, perhaps rubbing it in the way he had with the pillow that first night

Once Jateu slowly ripped open a bag of Cheetos — showy about it as usual — and the rich smel, of fake powdered theese rolled through my cave — de clous, irresistible. He ale one slowly letting me hear each distinct crunch.

My stomach growled loudly and I aughed at myself. I hadn't larghed in so long. I tried to remember the last time and couldn't just that strange bout of macabre hysteria in the desert, which really durit count as laughter. Even before I dicome here, there hadn't been much I'd found funny.

But this seemed bilarious to me for some reason—my stomach yearning after that one small Cheeto—and I laughed again. A sign of madness, surely

I didn't know how my reaction offended him but he got up and disappeared. After a long moment, I could hear him eating the Cheetos again, but from farther away. I peeked out of the hole to see that he was sitting in the shadows at the end of the corridor. his back to me. I pulled my head inside afraid he might turn and catch me watching. From then on, he stayed down at that end of the hall as much as possible. Only at night did he stretch out in front of my prison.

Twice a day - or rather twice a right as he never rook me when the others were about — I got to walk to the room with the rivers at was a highlight despite the terror as it was the only time I was not hunched into the unnatural shapes my small cave forced on me. Each time I had to craw back inside was harder than the last

Three times that week laterays during the sleeping hours, someone came to check on us

The first time it was Kyie

Jared's sudden lunge to his fect woke me "Get out of here." he warned, hokking the gun ready

"Just checking," Kue said. His voice was far away but loud and rough enough that I was sure it was not his brother. "Someday you might steep too soundly."

lared sonly answer was to cock the gun

I heard Kyle's laughter traiting behind him as he left

The other two mes I didn't know who it was kyle again or maybe

Ian or maybe someone whose name I hadn't learned. All I knew was that twice more I was woken by lated jumping to bis feet with the gun pointed at the intruder. No more words were spoken. Whoever was this object, ag didn't bother to make conversation. When they were gone, Jared went back to sleep quickly. It look me longer to quiet my heart.

The fourth time was something new

I was not quite asleep when fared started awake, rolling to his knees in a swift movemen. He came up with the gun in his hands and a curse on his lips.

"Easy," a voice mi impred from the distance. "I come in peace."

"Whatever you're selling I'm not buy itg." Jaced growled

"I just want to talk." The voice came closer. "You're buried down here, missing the important discussions. We miss your take on things."

"I'm sure," Jared said sarcastica..y

"Oh put the gan down If I was planning to fight you I would have come with tour guys this time."

There was a short stence, and when Jared spoke again, his voice carried a hint of Jark humor. "How's your brother these days?" he asked Jared seemed to enjoy the gues ion. It relaxed him to lease his visitor. He sat down and slouched against the wall halfway in front of my prison, at ease, but with the gun still ready.

My neck acheu, seeming to comprehend that the hands that had crushed and bruised it were very close by

"He's sum furning about his nose," Ian salu. "Oh, well —it's not the first time it's been broken I —te —him you said you were sorry."

"I'm not."

"I know. No one is ever sorry for hatting Kyle."

They is ighed quietly together, there was a sense of campradetic in their amusement that seemed wildly out of piace while fared held a gun loosely pointed in Tan's direction. But then, the bonds that were forged in this desperate place must have been very string. Thicker than blood.

Ian sat down on the mat next to lared I could see his proble in submother a black shape against the blue light. I noticed that his nose was perfect a straight, aquiline the kind of nose that I is seen in pactures of famous sculptures. Did that mean that others found him

more begraple than the brother whose nose was often broken? Or that he was better at ducking?

"So what do you want. Iang Not just an apology for Kyle I imagine."

"Did Jeb tell you?"

"I don't knew what youre talking about.

"They ve given up the search. Even the Seckers."

I sted didn't comment, but I could test the studget tens on in the air around him.

"We ve been keeping a close watch for some change but they never seemed overly anxious. The search never strayed from the area where we abandoned the car and for the past few class they were clearly looking for a body rather than a survivor. Then two pights ago we caught a lucky break. The search party left some trash in the open and a pack of covotes raided their base camp. One of them was coming back tale and surposed the animals. The covotes attacked and dragged the Seeker a good hundred yards into the desert before the rest of them heard its screams and came to the rescue. The other Seekers were armed, of course. They scared the covotes off easily and the victim wasn't seriously hard but the event seems to have answered any questions they might have had about what happened to our goest here."

I wondered how they were able to spy on the Seekers who searched for me — to see so much. I to a strangely exposed by the idea I didn't ake the parture in my beaut the humans a wisible watching the souls they hated. The thought made the skip on the back of my neck prickle.

"So they packed up and left. The Seekers gave up the search. All the volunteers went home. No one is moving or it." His profile turned toward me, and a hunched down, hoping it was too lark to see me in here—that lake his face. I would appear as only a black shape. "I magine it's been declared officially dead if they keep track of those things the way we used to feb's been saving. I told you so to anyone who is stand still long enough to hear it."

lated grambled something incoherent. I could us a pick out Jeb's name. Then he initialed a sharp breath blew it out and said. "All right, then, I guess that's the end of it."

"That's what it looks like "Ian besitated for a moment and then added, "Except — Well, it's probably nothing at all "

Jared tensed again the didn't like having his intelligence edited. "Go on "

"No one but Kyle thinks much of it, and you know how Kyle is " Jared grunted his assent to that

"You ve got the best instructs for this kind of thing. I wanted your opinion. That siwhy I mihere taking my life into my bunds to infiltrate the restricted area," Ian said drily, and then his voice was afterly serious again. "You see, there is his one is Seeker, no doubt about that wit packs a Glock."

It for k me a second to understand the word he used it wasn't a tamiliar part of Melanie's vocabiliary. When I understood that he was talking about a kind of g in the wistful envious tone in his voice made me feel slightly ill.

"Kyle was the first to notice tow this one stood out it didn't seem important to the rest — certainly not part of the decision making process. (The it had suggestions enough, from what we could see, but no one scemed to listen to it. Wish we could be heard what it was saying."

My skin prickled anxiously again.

"Anyway" Ian continued, "when they called off the search, this one wasn't happy with the decision. You know how the parasites are a ways so very preasant? This was weird—its the crosest I velever seen them come to an argument. Not a real argument, because none of the others argued back, but the unhappy one's relocked like I was arguing with them. The core group of Seekers disregarded it—they're all gone."

"But the unit appy once" Jared asked

"It got in a car and drove ha tway to Fhoenix. Then a grove back to Tucson. Then it drove west again."

"5till searching."

"Or very confused It stopped at that convenience store by the peak Talked to the parasite that worked there though that one had already been questioned,"

"Hah," Jired grunted He was interested now concentrating on the puzzle.

"Then it went for a tilke up the peak — stupid little thing. Had to be burning alive, wearing brack from head to toe."

A spasm rocked through my body. I tound myself off the floor cringing against the back want of my cell. My hands flew up instinctively to protect my face. I heard a hiss echo through the small space, and only after it faded that I real zent was mine.

"What was that?" Ian asked, his voice shocked

I peeken through my fingers to see both of their faces caning through the hole toward me. Jan's was black, but part of Jared's was at, his features hard as stone

I wanted to be st..., invisible but tremors I couldn't control were shaking violently down my spine.

Jared leaned away and came back with the lamp in his hands.

"Look at its eyes." Ian mattered: "It's trightened."

I could see both their expressions now, our a looked on viat Jared. His gaze was tightly focused on the, calculating. I guessed he was thanking through what Ian had said looking for the trigger to my be havior.

My body wouldn't stop-shaking.

She il never give up. Meianie mosneu-

I know, I know, I mouned back

When had our distaste turned to tear? My stomach knotted and heaven. Why countrit she just let me be dead like the rest of them had? When I was dead would she hant me still?

"Who is the Seeker in black?" Jared suddenly barked at me

My aps trembled, but I didn't answer. Shence was safest

"I know you can talk," Jared growled. "You talk to Jeb and Jamie. And now you're going to talk to me."

He climbed into the mouth of the cave huffing with surprise at how lightly he had to fold himse the manage it. The low ceiling forced him to kneel, and that didn't make him happy. I could see he dirather stand over me.

I had nowhere to run I was already wedged into the deepest corner. The cave barely had room for the two of us. I could feel his breath on my skin.

"Tell me what you know," he ordered

Abandoned

ho is the Seeker in black? Why is it still searching?" Jared's shout was deafening, echoing at me from all sides.

I hid behind my hands, waiting for the first blow

"Ab hired?" Ian marmared "Maybe you should let me

"Stay out of it "

Ian's voice got closer, and the rocks grated as he tried to follow lared into the small space that was already too full "Can't you see it's too scared to talk? Leave it alone for a sec..."

I heard something scrape the floor as Jared moved, and then a thud. Ian cursed. I peered through my fingers to see that Ian was no longer visible and Jared had his back to me

Ian spit and grouned "That's twice" he growied and I understood that the punch meant for me had been diverted by Ian's interference

"I'm ready to go for three," Jared mattered, but he turned back around to face me for nging light with him held grabbed the lamp with the hand that had struck fan. The cave seemed almost brilliant after so much darkness

Jared spoke to me again surutin zing my face in the new illuminations making each word a sentence. "Who Is: The Seeker."

I dropped my hands and stared into his pitiless eyes. It pointered the that someone else had suffered for my spence — even someone who had once thed to kin me. This was not how furture was silphosed to work.

Jared's expression wavered as he read the change in mine. "I don't have to hart you" he said quietly not as sure of himself. "But I dehave to know the answer to my question."

This wasn't even the right question in not a secret I was in any way bound to protect

"Tell me" he insisted, his eyes right with frustration and deep un happiness.

Was I truly a coward. I would rather have believed that I was that my fear of pain was stronger than anything else. The real reason I opened my mouth and spike was so much more pathetic.

I wanted to please him, this human who hated me so fiercely

"The Seeker," I began my voice rough and hoarse. I hadn't spoken in a long time.

He interrupted, impatient "We already know it's a Seeker"

"No, not just any Seeker" I whispered. "My Seeker"

"What do you mean, your Seeker?"

"Assigned to melfor owing mel Shos the reason." I caught my self-just before I spoke the word that would have meant our death. Just before I could say we. The ultimate truth that he would see as the ultimate tie — playing on his deepest wishes, his deepest pain. He would never see that it was possible for his wish to be true. He would only see a dangerous, far noking out through the eyes be'd loved.

"The reason?" he prompted

"The reason I ran away" I breathed "The reason I came here"

Not entirely true, but not entirely a lie, either

Jared stared at me this mouth half open, as he tried to process this. From the corner of my eye. I could see that Ian was peering through the hole again his vivid blue eyes wide with surprise. There was blood dark on his paie hps.

"You is " away from a Seekerr Bit yours one of them " Jared

struggled to compose himse f, to get back to his interrogation. "Why would a tollow you? What did it want?"

I swallowed the sound seemed annaturally loud. "She wanted you You and Jamie."

His expression hardened "And you were trying to lead it here?"

1 shook my bead "I didn't I - " How could I explain it? He dinever accept the truth.

"Whate"

"I did it want to be her I don't like her"

He blinked, confused again "Don't you all have to like every one?"

"We're supposed to "I admitted coloring with shame

"Who did you tell about this piacer" Ian asked over Jared's shoulder. Jared scowled but kept his eyes on my face.

"I couldn't ter. I didn't know. I just saw the lines. The lines on the album. I drew them for the Seeker. but we didn't know what they were. She still thinks they re a road map." I cot lon't seem to stop to king. I then to make the words think slower, to protect myself from a sup.

"What do you mean you didn't know what they were? You rehere." Jared's hand flexes, toward me but dropped before it closed the small distance.

"I I was having trouble with my with the with her memory I didn't understand. I couldn't access everything. There were was a. That's why the Seeker was assigned to me, waiting for me to unlock the rest." Too much too much I bit my tongue.

Ian and Jared exchanged a look. They dinever heart, unvibing like this before. They didn't trust me but they wanted so desper ately to be leve it was possible. They wanted it loo much. Thus made them fear.

Jaren's voice whipped our with a sunder harshness. "Were you able to access my cabin?"

"Not for a long time."

"And then you told the Seeker"

"No"

"No? Why not?"

"Because by the time I could remember to I d dn't want to tell her"

lan's eyes were frozen wide

Jared's voice changed, became Arw, a most tender. So much more dangerous than the shouting. "Why didn't you want to tell her?"

My jaw locked hard. It was not the secret, but stall it was a secret be would have to beat out of me. In this moment, my determination to hold my rongue had less to do with seit preservation than it did with a stupid, gradging kind of prode. I would not tell this man who despised me that I loved him.

He watched the defiance flash in my eves, and he seemed to under stand what it would take to get this answer. He decided to skip it—or maybe to come back to it, later, save it for last, in case I wouldn't be able to answer any more questions when he was done with me.

"Why weren't you able to access everything? Is that ___normal?"

This question was very dangerous, too. For the first time so far I told an outright lie.

"She fell a long way. The body was camaged."

Lying did not come easily to melithis he fell flat fared and lan both reacted to the false note. Jared's head couked to the side lone of lans ink black eyebrows rose.

"Why aso tithis Seeker giving up I we the resta" Ian asked.

I was abruptly exhausted. I knew they could keep this up all night, would keep this up all night if I continued to answer, and eventually I would make a mistake. I sumped against the will and closed my eyes.

"I don't know." I whispered. "She's not like other souls. She's annoying."

Ian laughed once a startled sound

"And you — are you like other ___rowls" Jates asked

I opened my eves and started at him weartly for a long moment What a stupid question, I thought. Then I shut my eyes tight, buried my face against my knees, and wrapped my arms around my head

Either Jared understood that I was done speaking or his body was complaining too loudly to be ignored. He grunted a few times as he squeezed himself out of the opening of my cave taking the lamp with him, and then grosned quietly as he stretched.

"That was unexpected " Ian wh spered

"Lies, of course" lared whispered back. I could ust barely make out their words. They probably didn't realize how the sound echoed back to me in here. "On v..... I can't guite figure out what it wants us to be leve — where it's trying to lead us."

"I don't think it's lying. Well except the one time. Did you no tice?"

"Part of the act."

"Jared, when have you ever met a parasite who could be about anything? Except a Seeker of course."

"Which it must be."

"Are you serious?"

"It's the best explanation"

"She if it is the furthest thing from a Seeker I've ever seen. If a Seeker had any dea how to find us, it would have brought an army."

"And they wouldn't have found anything But she it got in didn't it?"

"It's almost been killed half a dozen "

"Yet it's still breathing, isn't it?"

They were quiet for a long time. So long that I started to think about moving out of the cramped ball I was curted in but I didn't want to make any noise by lying down I wished Ian would leave so I could sleep. The adrenatine left me so worn out when it drained from my system.

"I think I'm going to go talk to Jeb." Ian eventually whispered

"Oh, thus s a great idea" Jared's voice was thick with sarcasm

"Do you remember that first night? When it uniped between you and Kyie? That was bizatre."

"It was just trying to find a way to stay a ive, to escape

"By giving Kyae the go-ahead to k" her are Good plan."

"It worked."

"Jeb's gun worked. Did she know he was on his wave"

"You're overthanking this. Ian. That's what it wants."

"I don't think you're right I don't know why but I don't think she wants us to think about her at all." I heard Ian get to his feet "You know what's really twisted." he muttered, his voice no longer a whisper

"What's that?"

"I felt givity—gu ley as he — watching her flingh away from us Seeing the black marks on her neck."

"You can't let u get to you! ke that " Jared was suddenly disturbed."
It's not human. Don't forget that,"

"Just because she isn't human, do you think that means she doesn't feel pain?" Ian asked as this voice fuded into the distance. "That she doesn't feel just like a girl who's been bealen." bearen by us?"

"Get a hold of yourse f" lared hissed after him

"See you around, Jared."

Jared don't relax for a lung time after langett he paced for a while back and forth in tront of the cave and then sation the mat, blocking my light and muttered incomprehensibly to himself I gave up waiting tot him to fall askeep and stretched out as well as I could on the how like floor. He tamped when my movement make noise and then started muttering to himself again.

"Garacy" he gram ned in sestaing lones. "Letting it get to him Just I ke Jeb, like Jamie. Can't let this go on Stapia to let it live."

Goose bumps rose on my arms, but I tried to ignore hem. It I panicked every time he thought also it it may me. I'd never have a moment's peace. I rurned onto my stomach to bend my spine in the other direction, and he lerked again and then apsed into scence. I was sure he was still brooding when i finally drifted to sleep.

When I woke up Jared was sitting on the mal where I could see him elbows on knees, his head leaning against one fist.

I didn't feel as if I is slept more than an hour or two, but I was too sore to try to go back to sleep right away. Instead, I fretten about Ian's visit worthing that Jared would work even harder to keep me seconded after lan's strange reaction. Why couldn't Ian have kept his mouth shift about feeling go rye at he knew he was capable of guilt, why did te go around stranging people in the first place? Me anie was in ritated with Ian too, and nervous about the outcome of his qualms.

Our wornes were interrupted after list a few minutes." Si isome "I heard Jeb call. "Don't get worked up." Jared cocked the gun.

"Go ahead and shoot melloid. Go ahead." The sound of Jeb's voice got closer with every word.

Jared sighed and put the gun down "Please leave."

"Need to talk to you." Job said hulfling as he sat down across from Jared. "Frey, there " he said in my direction, node, ng

"You know how much I hate that " Jared muttered.

"Yep."

"Ian already fold me about the Seckers

"I know I was just talk in with him about it"

"Great. Then what do you want?"

"Not so much what I want. It's what everybody needs. We're running low on lost about everything. We need a real comprehensive supply run."

"Oh " Jared muttered this topic was not what he dibect tensed for After a short pause he said, "Send Kvie"

"Okay" Job said easily, bracing himself against the wall to rise again

Jarea sighed. It seeman his suggest on had been a builf. He toided as soon as Jeb took him up on it. "No Not Kyle. He's too...."

Jeb chackled "Almost got us in some real hot water the last time he was out alone didn't he? Not one to think things through Ian then?"

"He thinks things through 100 much"

"Brandte"

"He's no good for the long trips. Starts getting panicked a few weeks in Makes mistakes."

"Okay, you tell me who, then."

The seconds passed and I heard Jared sack in a breath now and then each time as if he was about to give Jeb an answer but then he nist exhaled and said nothing.

"Ian and Kyle together?" Job asked. "Maybe they could balance each other out."

Jared grouned "Like the last time? Okay okay. I know it has to be me."

"You re the best" Jeb agreed "You changed our lives when you showed up here."

Melan e and I nodded to ourselves, this didn't surprise either of as-

fared is magic. Jamie and I were perfectly safe white farea's instincts guided us we never came close to getting eaugh. It it had been tared in Chicago. In sure he would have made it out fine

Jared jerked his shoulder loward me "What about " e"

"I'll keep an eye on her when I can And I'll expect you to take Kyle with you. That oughts help."

"That won't be enough. Kist gone and you keeping an eye on her when you can She in won't last long."

Jeb shrugged "I'll do my best. That's all I can do."

fared started to shake his head slowly back and torth

"How long can you stay down here?" Jeb asked him-

"I don't know," Jared whispered

There was a long silence. After a few minutes. Jeb began whistling tunelessly

I may Jared let out a hi ge breuth that I hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"In leave tonight." The words were slow han of resignation but a so relief. His voice changed slightly, got a line less detensive. It was as though he was making the transition back to who held been here before I showed up. Letting one responsibly tylis de from his shoulders and putting another more we come one in its place.

He was giving up on keeping me alive letting nature—or rather moo justice—take its course. When he returned, and I was dead, he wouldn't hold anyone responsible. He would not mourn. All this I could hear in those three words.

I knew the human exaggeration for sorrow—a hinter beart. Me and remembered speaking the phrase hersel. But I dialways thought of it as a hyperbole in traditional description for something that had no real physicing call link. I ke a green thamb. So I wasn't expecting the pain in my chest. The nausealityes, the swelling in my throat lives, and lives the tears butning in my eyes. But what was the inpping sensation just under my rib cage? It made no logical sense

And it was it just ripping, but twisting and pulling in different directions. Because Melanie's heart broke too, and it was a separate sensation, as if we'd grown another organ to compensate for our twin awarenesses. A double heart for a double mind. Twice the pain

He silvating she sobbed. We likewer see timingum. She didn't uses tion the fact that we were going to die

I wanted to weep with her but someone had to keep her head. I bit my hand to hold the moan back.

"That's probably best," Jeb said.

"I il need to get some things organized...." A ready Jared's mind was far far away from this claustrophobic corridor.

"Ill take over here then. Have a safe trip."

"Thanks, Guess I usee you when I see you Jeb."

"Guess so."

Jared handed the gun back to Jeh stood up, and brushed absently at the dust on his clothes. Then he was off, hurrying down the half with his familiar quick step, his mind on other things. Not one glance in my direction, not one more shought for my fate.

I listened to the facing sound of his tootsteps unto they were gone. Then, forgetting Job's existence, I pressed it y face into my hands and sobbed.

Freed

ebuct me cry myself out without interrupting. He didn't comment all through the following sniffles. It was only when I'd been completely silent for a good balt hour that he spoke

"Still awake in there?"

I codo t answer. I was too much in the habit of silence

"You want to come out here and stretch?" he offered. "My back is aching just thinking about that stupid hole."

Ironically considering my week of maddening silence, I wasn't in the mood for company. But his ofter wasn't one I could refuse. Before I could think about it, my hands were pulling me through the exit.

Jeb was sitting with crossed legs on the mat. I watched him for some reaction as I shook out my arms and legs and rouled my shoulders but he had his eyes closed. Like the time of famile's visit he looked asleep.

How long had it been since I'd seen Jamie? And now was he now? My already sore heart gave a painfy. Ittle lurch

"Fee better?" Job asked, his eyes opening.

I shrugged

"It's going to be okay you know." He grinned a wide face stretching grin. "That stuff I said to lared. We'll I won't say I hed exactly because it's all true if you look at it from a certain angle but from another angle it wasn't so much the truth as it was what he needed to hear."

I last stared. I didn't understand a word of what he was saying.

"Anyway lared needs a break from this. Not from you kid " he added quickly "but from the situation. He il gain some perspective while he's away."

I wondered how he seemed to know exactly which words and phrases would cut at me. And, more than that, why should leb care it his words hart me, or even if my back was aching and throbing? His kindness toward me was frightening in its own way because it was incomprehensible. At least Jared's actions made sense Kyle's and Ian's murder attempts the doctor's cheerful eagerness to hurt me. These behaviors also were logical. Not kindness. What did Jeb want from mer.

"Don't look so glam" leb urged. "There's a bright side to this Jared was being real pigheaded about you, and now that he's temporarily out of the picture it's bound to make things more comfortable."

My evebrows furrowed as I tried to decide what he meant

"For example," he went on "This space here we usually use for storage. Now, when ared and the guys get back, we're going to need someptace to put all the stuff they aring home with them. So we might as well find a new place for you now. Something a little bigger, mayber Something with a bede." He smiled again as he danged the carrot in front of me.

I wanted for him to snatch it away, to tell me he was toking.

Instead his eyes in the color of taded biae teams became very very gentle. Something about the expression in them brought the lump back to my throat.

"You don't have to go back in that hole, honey. The worst part's over "

I found that I couldn't doubt the carnest look on his face. For the second time in an hour, I put my face in my hands and cried.

He got to his feet and patted me awkwardly in the solubler. He dient seem comfertable with tears. "There, here" he mun bied

I get control of revseif more quickly this time. When I suped the wet from my eves and smiled tentatively at him he nodded in approval.

"That sia are " he said patting me again." Now we have to hang out here until we to sure Jared's really gone and can't catch us." He grinned conspiratorially. "Then we have some fund."

I remembered that his idea of fun was usually along the lines of an armed standoff

He chuckled at my expression. "Don't worry about it. While we're walting, you might as we litry it get some rost. I'll her even that skinny mattress worrelief profity good to you right now."

I looked from his face to the mat on the floor and back.

"Go on" he said. "You work like you could use a good sleep. If keep watch over you."

Touched now moistine in my eves I sank down on the mat and ad my head on the planw. It was heaven a despite Jeb's calling it that I stretched by to my him height pointing my toes and reaching out with my triggers. I heard my joints popping. Then I et myse touth into the mattress. It teat as dut were bugg, ig me erasing all the sore spots. I sighed.

"Does me good to see that" Job mittered. "It's like an not you can't scratch knowing someone is suffering under your own root."

He eased himself to the floor a few yards away and started hum in ng quietly. I was asleep before he d finished the first bar

When I woke up, I knew that I'd been so ally askeep for a long time—a longer stretch than I dislept since coming here. No pains no frightening interruptions. I would have test pretty good, except that waxing on the pulow reminded me that lared was gone. If still smelled ake him. And in a good way not the way I smelled.

Back to not dreams. Melante's ahed fortomic

I rememored my dream on a vague a but I knew it had for tured Jared, as was usual when I was able to sleep deeply enough to dream

"Morning kid." on said, sounding chipper

I peeled back my ids to look at him. Had he sat against the wall at

nights He didn't look tired in a listadden vitett guary or monopolizing the befter accommodations

"So the glass are long gone " he said midius astically "How hout a tour?" He stroked the gun's ong through a strop at his waist with an unconscious gesture.

My eyes opened wheer stared at him in disbratef. A tour?

"Now don't curn sissy on me. Nobody's going to bother you. And you Il need to be able to find your way around eventually."

He need out a hand to help me up-

I took it automal cally, my head spiriting as I took to process what he was saving. I would need to find my way around? Why? And what dwing mean "eventually"? How long dad he expecting to last?

He pulled the to my seet and led me forward

I dil rgotten what it was like in move through the cark tunnels with a hand golding me it was so easy — wa king barely took any concentration at all

"Let's see I Job in rmined. "Maybe the right wing first bet up a decent place for you. Then the kitchens. "He went on planning his tour continuing as we stepped through the narrow crevice into the bright tunnel that ica in the even brighter big room. When he sound of voices reached us. I foll my mouth go dry, leb kept right on chatting at the either missing or ignoring my terror.

"I'll het he carrors are sprou ed today" he was saving as he cu me não he main plazo. The light bill led me, and I conditisee who was there but I could for their eyes on me. The sudden silence was as ominous as ever.

"Yep." Joh answered himselt. "Now I always think that looks respretly. A nice spring green like that is a treat to see."

He stopped and he all is hand out inviting me to look I squitted in the direction he gest treating the room as I waited for them to adjust It took a moment but then I saw what he was talking about I also saw that there were maybe falsen people here today a littlem regarding me with host leeves. But hey were busy with something else 100.

The wide dark square that took up the center of the dig covern was no longer dark. Half of it was juzzy with spring green, just as Joh had said. It was prefty. And amazing

No wonder no one stood on this space. It was a garden.

"Carrots?" I whispered

He answered at normal volume. "This half that's greening up. The other half is spinach. Should be up in a few days."

The people in the room had gone back to work still pecking at me now and then but mostly concentrating on what they were doing. It was easy enough to understand their actions—and the big barrel on wheels, and the hoses—now that I recognized the garden.

"Irngating?" I whispered again.

"That's right. Dries out pretty quick in this heat."

I needed in agreement. It was strill early, I guessed but I was already sweaty. The heat from the intense radiance overhead was strilling in the caves. I tried to examine the cerling again, but it was too bright to stare at

I tugged Jeb's sleeve and squinted up at the dazzling light "How?"

Jeb smiled seeming thrilled with my curiosity. "Same way the magicians do a with mirrors kild. Hindreds of 'em. Took me long enough to get them all up there. It's race to have extra hands around here when they need cleaning. See, there's only four small vents in the celling here, and that wasn't enough light for what I had in mind. What do you think of it?"

He pilied his shoulders back, proud again.

"Bruliant," I wh spered "Astonishing"

Jeb grin ieu and nodded, enjoying my reaction

"Let's keep on" he suggested. "Got a lot to do today."

He led me to a new tunnel, a wide naturally shaped tube that ran off from the big cave. This was new territory. My muscles a lifecked up: I moved torward with stiff legs, unbending knees.

Jeb patted my hand but otherwise gnored my nerves. "This is mostly sleeping quarters and some storage. The tubes are closer to the surface here, so it was easier to get some tight."

He pointed up at a bright, slender crack in the tunnel coiling overhead. It threw a hand sized spot of white onto the floor

We reached a broad fork — not really a fork, because there were too many times. It was an octopos like branching of passageways

"Third from the left" he said and looked at me expectabily

"Third from the left?" I repeated.

"That's right. Don't forget. It's easy to get lost around here and that wouldn't be sate for you. Forksid just as soon stab you as send you in the right direction."

[shaddered "Thanks " I mattered with quiet sarcasm

He at ghed as it my answer had delighted him. "No point in ignoring the truth. Doesn't make it worse to have it said out houd."

It didn't make it better, either but I didn't say that I was beginning to emoy myself just a little. It was so ruce to have someone talk to me again. Jeb was, if nothing case interesting company

"One, two, three" he counted off then he led me down the third hallway from the left. We started passing round entrances covered by a variety of makeshift doors. Some were curtained off with patterned sheets of faurici others had hig pieces of cardhoard duct taped together. One hale had two real doors—one red pain ed wood one gray mera. Leaning over the opening

"Seven" leb counied and stopped in front of a smallish circle, the tallest point just a few inches higher than my head. This one protected its privacy with a pretty, addigneed screen — the kind that might divide the space in an elegant (ving room. There was a pattern of cherry biossoms embroidered across the silk.)

"This is the only space I can think of for now. The only one that's fitted up accent for human habitation. It will be empty for a few weeks and we'll figure something better out for you by the time its needed again."

He folded the screen as de, and a light that was brighter than that in the hallway greeted us.

The room he revealed gave me a strange feeting of vertigo probably because it was so much tailer than it was wide. Standing its tell that like standing it a rower or a silo not that I had ever been in such places, but those were the comparisons. Me arise made. The certing twice as high as the room was wide was a maze of cracks. Like times of light the cracks circled around and almost met. This seemed tangerous to me illustrable. But less showed no fear of cave inside led me farther in.

There was a double sized mattress on the floor, with about a vard of space on three sides of a. The two pallows and two blankers twisted nto two separate configurations on either half of the mattress made it look as it this from horseld a couple. A thick wooden pole something like a rake handle — was braced horizontally against the far wall at shoulder height with the ends lodged in two or the Swiss choose holes in the rock. Over it were draped a handful of I shirts and two pairs of earls. A wooden stool was flish with the wall beside the makeshift clothes tack, and on the floor beneath it was a stack of worn paperback books.

"Who?" I said to Joh whispering again. This space so obvious vibelonged to someone that I no longer felt like we were alone.

Tust one of the guys out on the raid. Won't be back for a while. We'll find you something by then."

I sudn't like it—not the room, but the idea of staying in it. The presence of the owner was strong despite the simple belongings. No matter who he was he would not be happy to have matter. He would hate it.

Jeb seconed to read ny mond — or maybe the expression on my face was alear enough that he didn't have to

"Now now" he said "Don't worry about that. This is my house, and this is use one of my many guest rooms. I say who is and isn't my guest. Right now you are my guest, and I am offering you this room."

I still didn't like it but I wasn't going to upset Job, either I vowed that I would disturb nothing, if it meant sleeping on the floor

"Well let's keep moving. Don't forget third from the left, seventh in."

"Green screen," I added.

"Exactly."

Jeb took me back through the big garden room, around the perimeter to the opposite side, and through the biggest tunnel exit. When we passed the irrigators, they stiffened and turned, afraid to have me behind their backs.

This tunnel was well at the bright crevices coming at intervals too regular to be natural.

"We go even closer to the surface now 1 gets differ but it gets how ter too."

I not ced that a most immediately Instead of peling steamed, we

were now being baked. The air was less stuffly and siale. I could taste the desert dust.

There were more voices alread. It is to steel myself against the inevitable reaction. If lebits sted on treating moline. The albeit has a human like a welcome guest. I was going to have longer used to this. No reason to let it make me has seous over and over again. My stomach began an unhappy to ling anyway.

"This ways the kitchen" Jeb it all me-

At first I though, we were in another trinne one crowded with people. I pressed myself against the wall trying to keep my distance

The kirchen was a long corridor with a high certing, higher than it was wide like my new quarters. The light was oright and hot illustead of this crevices through deep rock this place had hoge open holes.

"Can't cook in the davir lie, of course Smoke you know So we mainly use this as the mess half until night a li"

As conversation had come to an abrupt halt so let's words were clear for everyone to hear I tried to hide behind him ib it he kept walking farther in.

We'd interrupted break ast or maybe a was lanch

The homons almost twenty at a quick estimate were very close here. It wasn't ke he big cavern. I wantou to keep my eves on the floor but I con unit stop, hem from flashing afound the room Just in case, a could feel my body tensing to run for it, though where I would run, I didn't know.

Against both siles of the hallway there were long piles of rock. Most virough purple volcanic stone with some lighter colored substance — coments—running between them creating sea as helding them together. On top of these piles were different stones browner in color and flat. They were glied together with the light gray grout as well. The final product, was a rolative vieven surface—ke a counter or a table. It was clear that they were used for both

The humans sation some leaned on others. I recognized he bread rous they be I suspended between the table and their means, trozen with dishelled as they took in Jeh and his one person tour.

Some of them were tains an Sharon Maggie and the doctor were the closest group to me. Me. they could nave auntigated at Job for our v. I had an odd convention that a could have stilled in my head.

and behowed songs out of Melanie's memory at the top of my lungs and they still would not have looked at me—but the doctor eyed me with a frank and almost friendly curios ty that made me feel cold deep inside my bones.

At the back end of the hall-shaped room. I recognized the tall man with ink black hair and my heart stattered. I I thought Jared was supposed to take the hostile brothers with him to make Jeb's jub of keeping me alive slightly easier. At least it was the younger line, Ian, who had be ated videveloped a constitute. I not quite as bad as leaving kyle behind. That consolation and not slow my racing pulse, however

"Everybody full so quick?" leb asked loudly and sart astically

"Lost our appetites." Maggie muttered.

"How book you" he said, turning to me. "You hungry?"

A quiet groan went through our and ence

I shook my head — a small but frantic motion. I didn't even know whether I was hangry but I knew I couldn't eat in front of this crowd that would gladly have eaten me.

"Well, I am I Jeb grambled. He wasked down the aisle between the counters, but I did not follow. I couldn't stand the thought of being within easy reach of the rest. I stayed pressed against the wall where I stood. Only Sharon and Maggie watched him go to a big plastic bin on one counter and grab a roll. Everyone else watched me. I was certain that if I moved an inch, they would pounce. I tried not to breathe

"We... let's just keep on movin." Jeb suggested around a mouthful of bread as he ambled back to me. "Nobody seems able to concentrate on their unch. Eastly distracted, this set."

I was watching the humans for sudden movements, not really seeing their faces after that first moment when I recognized the few I could put names to So it wasn't until Jamie stood up that I noticed him there

He was a head shorter than the add to beside him but taller than the two smaller children who purched on the counter on his other side. He hopped lightly off his scar and followed behind Jeb. His expression was tight, compressed, like he was trying to solve a difficult equation in his head. He examined me through narrow eyes as he approached on Jeb's heers. Now I wasn't the only one in the room holding my breath. The others gazes shifted back and forth between Melanie's brother and me.

Oh Janue Melame thought She hated the sad addit expression in his tice, and I probably hated it even more. She didn't feel as guilty as I did for putting it there.

If only we could take it away. She sighed

It's too ate. What could we do to make it better note?

I didn't mean the question more to an energy cally but I found my self-searching for an answer and Meiame searched too. We found nothing in the brief second we had to consider the matter, there was nothing to be found, I was sure. But we both knew we would be searching again when we were done with this asin ne tout and had a chance to think. If we lived it at long.

"Whatcha need, Kid?" Jeb asked without looking at him

"Jest wondering what you're doing" Jamie answered, his voice striving for nonchalance and only last failing

Jeb stopped when he got to me and turned to look at Jama. "Takin her for a tour of the place Just like I do for any newcomer."

There was another low grumble

"Can I come?" Jamue asked.

I saw Sharon shake her head fever shly, her expression outraged. Jeb agnored her.

"Doesn't bother me tyou can mind your manners."

Jamie shrugged, "No problem."

I had to move then—to knot my fingers together in front of me. I wanted so bactly to push Jamie's untidy had out of his eyes and then leave my arm around his neck. Something that would not go over well. I was sure

"Let's go." Jeb said to us both. He look as back out the way we had come. Jeb walked on one's de of me. Jamie on the other. Jamie scemed to be trying to stare as the floor, but he kept glancing up at my face just like I co. Idn't help glancing down at his. Whenever our eyes met we looked away again quickly.

We were about halfway down the big hall when I heard the quiet

tootsreps behind as. My reaction was instantaneous and unthinking. I skittered to one side of the lunner, sweeping Jamie along with one arm so that I was between him and whatever was coming for me

"Hey " he protested out to fid not knock my arm away

eb was just as quick. The gun twirled our of its strap with blinding speed.

Ian and the doctor both raised their hands above their heads.

"We can mind our manners, too" the doctor said. It was hard in believe that this soft spoken man with the friendly expression was the resident tort iter; he was an the more territying to me because his exterior was so benign. A person would be on her goard on a dark and ominous night in person would be ready. But on a clear strony day? How would she know to flee when she couldn't see any place for danger to hide?

Job squinted at Ian the barrel of the gun shifting to fullow his gaze.

"I don't mean any trouble, feb I is be list as mannerly as Duc."

"Fine" Jeb sale carry stowing his gun, "Just don't test me. I laven't shot anybody in a real long time, and I sort of miss the thrill of it."

I gasped. Everyone hearth that and turned to see my horrafied expression. The doctor was the first one to sugh, but even Jamie tomed to briefly

"It's a toke" Jamie whispered to me. His hand strayed from his side almost as if he was reaching for mine, but he quickly shoved it into the pocket of his shorts. I let my arm — still stretched protectively in front of his body — drop, too.

"Wen, the day's wasting," Joh said still a little surly "You'll as have to keep up 'cause I'm not wasting on you." He stalked forward before he was done speaking.

Named

kept right to leb's sile, a lattic in front of him. I wanted to be as far as possible from the two men following us. Jam'e walked somewhere in the middle not sure of where he wanted to be

I wasn't dole to concentrate much on the rest of led stour. My attention was not focused on the second set of gardens he led me through— he with corn growing waist high init, e blistering heat of the or antimitrors—or the wide but low cominged cavern he called the "recition". That one was pitch black and deep anderground but he told melt ley brought in lights when they wanted to play. If le word play didn't make sense to me, not here in this group of tense langry survivers but I didn't ask him to explain. There was more water here a tiny nox ously sufferous spring that Jeh said they sometimes used as a second latting because it was no good for drinking.

My attention was divided between the men walking behind as and the boy at my side

lan and the doctor did mind their manners surprisingly well. No one attacked the from behind. Though a thought my eyes might get

lodged in the back of my head from trying to see if they were about to They just followed quietly sometimes talking to each other in low voices. Their comments revolved around names I didn't know and nicknames for places and things that might or might not have been inside these caves. I couldn't understand any of it

Jamie sa dirothing, but he looked at me a lot. When I wasn't trying to keep an eye on the others. I was often pecking at him too. This left it le time to admite the things Job showed me lout he didn't seem to notice my preoccupations.

Some of the tunne's were very ong—the distances hidden benesth the ground here were mind bogging. Often they were pathhack, but Jeb and the others never so much as paused clearly familiar with their whereabouts and long since accustomed to traveling in darkness. It was harder for me than it was when Jeb and I were alone. In the dark every noise sounded like an attack. Even the doctor's and lans casual of after seemed—ke a cover for some nefactors move.

Paranoid, Melanie commented.

If that's what it takes to keep us aure so be it

I wish you would pay more altention to Uncle Jeb. This is fasce nating.

Do what you want with your time

I can only hear and see what you hear and see Wanderer she told me. Then she changed the subject Jamie looks owny, don't you think?

Not too wihappy

He looks. wary

We were just coming into some light after the longest trek so far in the humid blackness.

"This here is the southernmost spur of the tube system," Jeb explained as we walked "Not super convenient but it gets good light an daylong. That's why we made it the hospital wing. This is where Doc does his thing."

The moment Jeb announced where we were, my body troze and thy joints locked, I skildded to a half my feet planted against the rock floor. My eyes, wide with terror, flickered between Jeb's face and the face of the doctor.

Had this at been a ruse, then Walt for stubborn Jared to be out

of the picture and then I re me back here. I couldn't believe I'd watken to this place under my own power. How stupid I was!

Melante was just as aghast. We might as well have got terappea our selves for them!

They stared back at me. Jeb expressionless, the doctor looking as surprised as I telr—though not as hormfied.

I would have flinghed inpped myseit away from the touch of a band on my arm of the hand had not been so familiar

"No. it's okay Really Right. Uncle Jeb?" Jamie looked trusting y at the old man. "It's okay, right?"

"Sure it is " Jeb's foded blue eyes were calm and clear "Just showing you my place, kild, that's all."

"What are you talking about?" Ian grumbled from behind as sounding annoyed that he didn't understand

"Did you think we brought you here on purpose, for Doc?" Jamle said to me instead of answering Ian. "Because we wouldn't do that We promised Jared."

I stared at his carnest face, trying to believe

"Oh " Ian said as he understood, and then he laughed. "That wasn't a bad plan I'm surprised I didn't think of it."

Jamie scowled at the big man and patted my arm before removing his hand. "Don't be scared." he said.

Jeb took up where he ditert oft. "So this big room here is fitted up with a few cots in case anyone gets sick or hurt. We've been pretty tucks on that count. Doc doesn't have much to work with in an emet gency." Jeb grinned at me. "Your oaks threw out all our medicines when they took over things. Hard to get our hands on what we need."

I nodded slightly the movement was absentminded. I was still recling trying to get my bearings. This room tooked innocent chough as if it were only used for hearing, but it made my stomach twist and contract.

"What do you know about a len medicine?" the doctor asked sud denly. his flead cocked to the side. He watched my face with expectant currosity.

I stared at him wordlessly.

" In, you can talk to Doc" Jee encouraged me. "He sie pretty de cent guy all things considered."

Is sook my head once. I meant to answer the doctor's question, to tell hem that a know nothing, but they mist neterstood.

"She's not giving away any trace sourcts." Ian saut so in vil "Are you sweetheart?"

"Manners, Ian," Jeb barked

"Is it a secrete" Jam e asked guarded but clearly currous

I shook my head again. They a stared at me in confusion. Doc shook his head, too, slowly, buffled.

I thok a deep breath then whispered "I'm not a Healer I can't know how they the inequations — work Only that they do work they call father than merely realing symptoms. No trial and error Of course the human medicines were a scandou."

A four of them stated with blank expressions. First they were surprised when I cadn't answer, and now they were surprised when I and I llamans were impossible to please.

"Your kind didn't change too much of what we left behind." Jeh saw Jiougacially at or a moment. "Just the medical stuff and the spacesor is tosieud of planes. (Ther it an that life seems to go on just the same as ever—on the surface."

"We come to experience not to change." I whispered "Health takes priority over this philosophy though."

I show my mouth with an audible shap. I had to be more careful. The humans hardly wanted a lecture on soul plidosophy. Who knew what would anger them? Or what would shap their tragile patience?

leb noduce, so the ghthis and then shered as onward. He wasn't as enthus ast class he continued my tour through the tew connecting caves here in the medical wing not as involved in the presentation. When we turned around any headed back into the piack corridor he lapsed into silence, it was a long, quiet walk. I thought brough what I is said, looking for something that might have of lended, Joh was the strange for me to guess if that was the case. The ther humans hostile and suspicious as they were at least made sense.

How could I hope to make sense of Jebe.

The tour ended abruptly when we reentered the huge garden cavern where the correct sprouts made a bright green carpet across the dark floor

"Show's over " leb said graifly, looking at Ian and the doctor. "Go do something useful."

Ian rolled his eyes at the doctor, but they both turned goodnatured viendigh and made their way toward the biggest exit. If the one that led to the kitchen I remembered. Jamie hes tared looking after them but not thoying

"You come with me" Jeb told him slightly also graff this time. "I've got a job for you."

"Okay." Jamie said I could see that he was pleased to have been chosen.

amile wasked beside me again as we braded back toward the sleeping quarters section of the caves. I was surprised as we chose the third passageway from the left, that Jamie seemed to know exactly where we were going. Job was slightly behind us, but Jamie stopped at once when we reached the green screen that covered the seventh apartment. He moved the screen aside for me but stayed in the hall.

"You oway to staght for a white?" Jeb asked me

I nowled gratefinat the thought of hiding again. I ducked through the opening and then stood a few feet in, not sure what to do with myself. Melanie remembered that there were books here but I remaided her of my you to not touch anything.

"I got things to up, kid." Jeb said to Jamie. "Food ain't gonna fix itself you know. You up to guard Juty?"

"Sure" Jamie said with a bright smile. Flis than chest swelled with a deep breath.

My eyes widehed in a shellet as I watched Jeb place the rifle in Jamie's eager hands.

"Art you "razy" I should My voice was so loud that I didn't recognize it at first. It felt, ke I a been whispering forever

Job and Jamie looked up at the shocked. I was out in the halfway with them in a second

I almost reached for the hard metal of the barre, almost apped it from the boy's hands. What stopped me wasn't the knowledge that a

move like that would surely get molk look. What stopped me was the fact that I was weaker than the humans in this way, even to save the boy. I could not make myself louch the weapon.

I turned on Jeb instead

"What are you thinking? Giving the weapon to a child? He could kill himself."

"Jamie's been through enough to be called a man, I think. He knows how to handle himself around a gun."

Jam es shoulders straightened at leb's praise, and he gripped the gun tighter to his chest

I gaped at Jeb's stupicity "What if they come for me with him here? Did you think of what could happen? This isn't a joke! They II hurt him to get to me."

Jeb remained calm, his face placed. "Don't think there' i be any trouble today. I'd bet on it "

"Well, I wouldn't "I was yelling again. My voice echoed off the tunnel walls — someone was sure to hear, but I didn't care. Better they come while Jeb was still here. "If you're so sure, then leave me here alone. Let what happens happen. But don't put Jamie in danger."

"Is it the kid vou're worned about for are you just afraid that he littern the gun on your" Jeb asked, his voice almost languid

I blanked, my anger deraised. That thought had not even occurred to me. I glanced blank y at famile, met his surprised gaze, and saw that the idea was shocking to him, too.

It took me a minute to recover my side of the argument, and by the time I did Jeb's expression had changed. His eves were intent his mouth pursed—as if he were about to fit the last piece into a frustrating puzzle.

"Give the gun to Ian or any of the others, I don't care "I said my voice slow and even "Just leave the boy out of this."

Jeb's suchen face wide grin reminded mell strangely of a prone ingicat

"It's my house kid and I is do what I want I always do "

leo turned his back and ambled away down the half, whistling as he went. I walched him go, my mouth hanging open. When he disappeared I turned to famile, who was watching me with a stolen expression.

"I'm not a child," he mattered in a deeper tone than usual his chin

patring out helligeren av "New you should" you should go in your room."

The order was less than severe but there was nothing else I could do I dilost this disagreement by a large margin

I sat down with my back against the rock that formed one side of the cave opening—the side where I could hide behind the half opened screen but still watch Jamie. I wrapped my arms around my legs and began doing what I knew I would be doing as long as this this are situation continued: I worried.

I also strained my eyes and ears for some sound of approach to be ready. No matter what Jeb saud. I would prevent anyone from chalenging famile's guard. I would give myself up before they asked.

Yes, Mesante agreed succinctly.

Jamie stood in the ballway for a few minutes, the gun tight in his hands, unsure as to how to do his ion. He started pacing after that back and forth in front of the screen but he seemed to fee silly after a couple of passes. Then he sat down on the floor beside the open end of the screen. The gun eventually settled on his folded legs, and his chan into his cupped hands. After a long time, he sighed. Guard duty was not as exciting as he dibeen expecting.

I did not get bored watching him

After maybe an hour of two, he started looking at me again flickering glances. His ups opened a few times, and then he thought better of whatever he was going to say.

Laid my chin on my knees and waited as he struggled. My patience was rewarded.

"That planet you were coming from before you were in Melanie" he finally said. "What was it like there? Was it like here?"

The direct on of his thoughts caught me off guard. "No," I saw With only Jamie here, it felt right to speak normally instead of whispering, "No, it was very different."

"Will you tell me what it was like?" he asked cocking his head to one side the way he used to when he was really interested in one of Melanie's bedtime stories.

So I told him.

I to, I him all about the See Weeds, waterlogged planet. I told him about the two suns, the elliptical orbit, the gray waters, the unmoving

permanence of roots, the stunning visits of a chousand eyes, the endless conversations of a million soundless voices that all equid hear

He listened with wide eves and a fascinated smale

"Is that the only other place?" he asked when I fell silent trying to think of any. 1 ng I'd missed. "Are the Six Weeds"— he laughed once at the pun—"the only other ahens?"

I at ghed, too "Hartay No more than I'm the only alien on this world."

"Teil me"

So I told han about the Bats on the Singing Wind — how it was to live in musical blindness, how it was to fly I told him about the Mists Planet — how it feet to have thick white fur and four nearts to keep warm, how to give claw beasts a wide herth.

I started to be thirm about the Planet of the Flowers, about the color and the light, but he interrupted me with a new question.

"What about the little green gavs with the triangle heads and the big hackleves? The ones who crashed in Roswell and all that Was that you guys?"

"Nope, not as."

"Was it all fake?"

I do it know - maybe, maybe not. It's a orguniverse, and there's a lot of company out there,"

"How did you come here then if you weren't the lattle green guys, who were you? You had to have boules to move and staff, right?"

"Right" I agreed surprised at his grasp of the facts at hand. I shouldn't have been a riprised. I knew how bright he was, his mind like a thirsty sponge. "We used our Spider selves in the very beginning to get things started."

"Spiders?"

I told him about the Spiders— a fascinating species. Brilliant, the most incredible minds weld ever come across, and each Spider had three of them. Three brains, one in each section of their segmented bodies. We'd yet to find a problem they couldn't solve for us. And yet they were so colday analytical that they rarely came up with a problem they were curtous mough to solve for themselves. Of a courthosts, the Spiders we contect our occupation the most. They barely noticed

the difference and when they of it, they seemed to appreciate the difference and when they of it, they seemed to appreciate the difference we provided. The few souls who had walked on the started of the Spacers, planet before implantation told us that it was coad and gray—no wonder the Spacers only saw in black and white and had a limited sense of temperature. The Spacers lived short lives, but the young were from knowing everything their parent had, so no knowledge was lost.

I all ved out one of the short life terms of the species and then left with no desire to return. The amazing clarity of my thoughts the easy answers that came to any question almost without effort, the march and dance of numbers were no substitute for emotion and color which I could only vaguely inderstand when itside that body I wondered how any soul could be content there. Let the planet had been self-sufficient for thousands of Earth years. It was still open for settling only because the Spiders reproduced so quickly great sacs of eggs.

I started to tell Jamie how the offensive had been launched here. The Spiders were our best engineers—the ships they made for us danced nimbly and undetectably through the stars. The Spiders' hodies were almost as useful as their minds, thur long legs to each segment—from which they diearned their nuckname on this placet and twelve fingered hands on each leg. These six pointed fingers were as standard and strong as steel threads, capable ut the most descate procedures. About the mass of a cow but short and each the Spiders had no crouble with the first insertions. They were stronger, had humans smarter than humans, and prepared, which the Lumans were not

I stopped short in disentence, when I saw the crystalline sparkie on Jamie's cheek

He was staring straight ahead at nothing, his ips pressed in a tight line. A large arop of salt water round slowly down the check closest to me.

Itam. Melanic chas used me. Dian't you, bink a hat ye tir story won a mean to him?

Dian I you shock of warning me sooner?

She chant answer. No accust she dibeen as an ghe up is the story telling as I was.

"Jamie." I marmured. My voice was thick. The sight of his tear had done strange things to my throat. "Jamie. I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking."

lamie shook his head. "'S okay I asked I wanted to know how it happened." His voice was gruft, trying to bille the pain.

It was instinctive the desire to lean forward and wipe that tear away I tried at first to ignore it. I was not Melanie. But the tear hung there motionless, as if it would never to a Jamie's eyes stayed fixed on the blank wall, and his lips trembled.

He wasn't far from me. I stretched my arm out to brush my fingers against his cheek, the tear spread thin across his skin and disappeared. Acting on instinct again. I left my hand against his warm cheek, crading his face.

For a short second, he pretended to ignore me.

Then he roued toward me his eyes closed, his hands reaching. He curled into my side his cheek against the hollow of my shoulder, where it had once fit better, and sobbed.

These were not the tears of a third and that made them more protound—made it more sacred and painful that he would cry them in front of me. This was the grief of a man at the funeral for his entire family.

My arms wound around him, not fitting as easily as they used to, and I cried, too.

"I'm sorry." I said again and again I appropried for everything in those two words. That we diever found this place. That we dichasen in That I'd been the one to take his sister. That I'd brought her back here and hirt him again. That I'd made him cry today with my insensitive stories.

I didn't drop my arms when his anguish quieted. I was in no harry to let him go. It seemed as though my body had been starving for this from the beginning but I'd never understood before now what would feed the hunger. The mysterious bond of mother and child—so strong on this pranet—was not a mystery to me any longer. There was no bond greater than one that required your life for another's. I'd understood this truth before what I had not understood was why Now I knew why a mother would give her life for her child, and this knowledge would forever shaps the way I saw the an verse.

"I know I we taught you better than that kid "

We jumped apart. Jamie lurched to his feet, but I curted closer to the ground, cringing into the wall.

leb leaned down and picked up the gun weld both torgotten from the floor. "You've got to mind a gun better than this, Jam'e." His cone was very gentle.... it softened the criticism. He reached out to tousle. Jamie's shaggy huit.

Jamie discked under leb's hand in a face searlet with mortifica-

"Sorry." he muttered, and turned as if to flee. He stopped after lost a step, though, and swiveled back to look at me. "I don't know your name," he said.

"They called me Wanderer" I whispered

"Wanderer?"

I nodded.

He nouded, roo, then burned away. The anck of his neck was still red

When he was gond leb leaned against the rock and sud down till he was seated where Jamie had been. Like Jamie he kept the gub cradled in his lap.

"That's a real interesting name you've got there," he told me. He seemed to be back to his abatty mood. "Maybe sometime you tell me how you got it. Bet that's a good story. But it's kind of a mouthful don't you think? Wanderere."

I stared at him.

"Mind t1 ca. you Wanda for short? It flows easier."

He waited this time for a response. Finally, I sho gged. It clidn't matter to me whether he called me "k d" or some strange human nickname. I believed it was meant kindly.

"Okay then Wanda" He smiled, pleased at his invention "It's nice to have a hand e on you. Makes me feel like we're old friends."

He grinned that he get cheek-stretching grin and I couldn't help grinning back, though my smile was more rueful than delighted. He was supposed to be my enemy. He was probably insant. And he was my friend. Not that he wouldn't kill me if things to med out that way, but he wouldn't like doing it. With humans, what more could you ask of a friend?

Cracked

ch put his bands behind his head and looked up at the dark redling, his face thoughful. His charty mood had not passed

"I ve wondered a lot what it's like — getting caught, you know Saw it happen more than once come close a few times myscat. What would it be like a wondered. Would a hurt, having something put in your head? I've seen it done, you know."

My eyes widened in surprise, but he wasn't looking at me

"Secons - Ke you an use some Kind of anesthetic, but that's just a guess. Nobody was screaning in agony or anything, though, so it couldn't be too torturous."

I wrinkled my nose. Torture No. that was the humans specialty. "Those stories you were telling the kid were real interesting."

I staffened and he laughed lightly "Yeah I was astening Eaves dropping. I'll admit it I'm not sorry it was great staff and you won't talk to me the way you do with Jamie I really got a kick but of those bats and the plants and spiders. Gives a man lots to think about Always liked to read crazy, but there stuff science fiction and what

not. Ate that staff up. And the kid's like me — he's read at the books. The got it two, three times apiece. Must be a treat for him to get some new at mes. Sure is for me. You're a good storyteller."

I kept my eves down but I fent myself softening, losing my gliard a bit. Like anyone inside these emotional bodies, I was a sucker for flattery.

"Everyone here thinks you in need as out to turn us over to the Seekers."

The word sent a shock joiling through me. My jaw stiffened and my teeth cut my tongue. I tasted blood

"What other reason could there dee" he went on obstrous to my reaction or ignoring a "But shevire just trapped in fixed notions. I think I'm the only one with questions. I mean, what kind of a plan was that to wander off into the desert without any way to get back?" He chuckled "Wandering" guess that's your specially, ea, Wandar"

He leaned it ward me and oudged me with one elbow. Wide with uncertainty my eyes flickered to the floor, to his face, and back to the floor, He laughed again.

"That trek was just a few steps shy of a successful suicide in my op non. Definitely not a Seeker's MO, if you know what I mean. I ve tried to reason it cut it selegic high? So, if you didn't have backup, which I've seen no sign of and you had no way to get back. It en you must've had a different goal. You haven't been real to kattive since you got here incept with the kat just now, but I ve listened to what you have said. Kind of seems to rife inke the reason you almost died out there was cause you were not bent on finding that kid and Jared."

1 closed my eyes

"Only why would processes" leb asked, expecting no answer last musing "So, this is how I see it either you re a real vigorial actiess like a silper Seeker, some new breed sneakler than the first with some kind of a plan I can't figure out, or you're not acting. The first seems I ke a prefty complicated explanation for your behavior, then and now, and I don't buy it

"But if you're not acting"

He paused for a moment

"Spent a lot of time watching your kind. I was always waiting for

them to change you know when they aidn't have no act like is any more because there was no one to act for I kept on watching and waiting but they as kep on act in ke hamans. Stating with their bodies tam ites, going out or pichies in good weather plant in flowers and pain in pictures and at the rest of it. I we been windering if you all aren't turning sort of hi man. If we don't like some real in lalence, in the end."

He waited giving me a chance to respond I coin

"Saw something a few years ago, hat stack with me. Old man and woman, well the bodies of an old man and an old woman. Been together so long that the skin on their fragers grew in ridges around their wedding rings. They were holding hands, and he kissed her on her cheek, and sile biashed under all those wir, kies. Occurred to me that you have all the same feelings we have because you're really us, not just hands in a pupper."

"Yes." I whispered. "We have a lithe same feelings. Hope, and paid, and love."

"So if you aren't acting — we then I I swear to it that you loved them both You'de Wanda not us Mel's bouy"

I put my head down on my arms. The gesture was tantamoun, to an admission, but I didn't care. I children how it up anymore.

"So that's you But I wonder about my nicce too. What it was like for her what it while he like for me. When they put somebody inside your head, are you just a gone? Erased? Like heing dead? Or is it has being as eep? Are you aware of the outside control? Is it aware of you? Are you trapped diere, screaming inside?"

I sat very still trying to keep my face smooth

"Plainly your memories and behaviors all that is let behind. But your consciousness. Seems the some people wouldn't go down without a fight. Heal I know I would try to slay. Inever been one to take no for an answer, anyone will test you that I managhter. A lot us who are left are fighters. And you know I would a peopled Mel for a fighter, too."

He didn't move his eyes from the certaing but I looked at the floor stated a it memorialing the patterns to the purple gray dust

"Yeah I've wondered about har a jot."

I could feel his eyes on me now, though my head was still down. I didn't move except to breathe slowly in and out. It took a great deal of effort to keep that slow rhythm smooth. I had to swanny the blood was still flowing in my mouth.

Why did we ever think he was crazy? Mc. wondered. He sees every thing. He's a genuis.

He's both

Well marks this means we don't have to keep quiet arronore. He knows. She was hopeful. She'd been very quiet latery absent almost half the time. It wasn't as easy for her to concentrate when she was relatively happy. She'd won her big fight. She'd gotten us here. Her secrets were no longer in jeopardy. Jared and Jamie could never be betrayed by her memories.

With the fight taken out of her it was harder for her to find the will to speak leven to me. I could see how the idea of discovery — of having the other humans recognize her existence — invigorated her

Jeh knows yes Dues that really change anything?

She thought about the way the other numans looked at Jeb Right. She sighed But I think Janue — well be doesn't know or guess but I think be feels the truth.

You might be right a guess we li see if that does in m or us any good in the end

Jeb could only manage to keep quiet for a tew seconds, and then he was not again interrupting as "Preity interesting stuff. Not as much bang' bang' as the movies a used to like But still preity interesting. I'm like to hear more about those spider thingles. I'm real curious real curious, for sure."

I took a deep breath and rused my head. "What do you want to

He smaled at me warm y, has eyes crinkling into half moons. "Three brains, right?"

I nodded.

"How many eyes?"

"Twilve one at each uncture of the leg and the body. We didn't have lids, just a lot of fibers. - like stee, wool eyelashes to protect them."

the mouded in sleves bright. "Were they turry lake taranto as?"
"No Sort of liarmored scaled like a repule or a fish."

I significantly state wall settling myself in for a long conversa-

Jeb dient itsappoint on that count I lost track of how many questions he asked melitie warred details—the Spiders looks their behaviors, and how they dihandled Earth. Its diana fliner away from the invasion details on the contrary, he all iost seemed to endy that part more than the rest. It signestions came tast on the heels of my answers, and his grins were frequent. When he was satisfied about the Spiders hours, after he wanted to know more about the Flowers.

"You didn't have explain that one," he reminded mo

So I told am about that most beautiful and placid of planets. Almost every and I stopped to breathe he interrupted he with a new question. He liked to guess the answers before I could speak and didn't seem to mind gelting them wrong in the least.

No dru ya est flæs i ke a Venus flytrapy. I il het vou u.d. i ir maybe something higger ibke a bird. ilike a pterodaety. "

"No, we used sun, ght for food like most plants here."

"We that's not as much tun as my dea"

Somet mes I ound myself laughing with him

We were just moving on to the Dragons when Jamie showed up with dinner for three.

"H. Wanderer" he said a little embarrassed

"H Jamic" Lanswered a little shy no sure if he would regret the closeness well shared. I was latter all, the bad goy

Bit he sat down right next to me, between me and Jeb. crossing his tags and setting the tood tray in the modile of our true conclave. I was starting, and parched from all the talking. I though now of soup and downed it in a few gulps.

"Shou it knowr you were just being policy in the mess hall today Cotta speak up when you're hangry. Wanda, I'm no mind reader."

I dun't agree at thit bat last part, out I was too busy chewing a mouthful of bread to answer

"Wanda?" Jamie asked.

I nodued, letting him know that I dran't minu-

"Kinda suits her "concha chinic?" Jeb was so proud of nimself. I was surprised be dional path inself on the back. "ast for effect

"Kinda, I guess" Jamie said. "Were you guys talking about drag ons?"

"Yeah," Jeb to d him enthusiast cally, "but not the lizardy kind. They relating made up of jety. They can fly, though a sort of The air's thicker sort of jety too. So it's almost like swimming. And they can breathe acid—that's about as good as fire, wouldn't you say?"

I let Jeb fill Jamie in on the details while I ate more than my share of lood and drained a water bottle. When my mouth was free, Jeb started in with the questions again.

"Now, this acid"

Jamie didn't ask questions the way Jeb did, and I was more careful about what I said with rim there. However, this time Jeb never asked anything that might lead to a touchy subject, whether by coincidence or design, so my caution wasn't necessary.

The light slowly faded until the hallway was black. Then it was silver a tiny, diminished from the mount hat was list enough as my eyes adjusted to see the man and the boy beside me

Jamie edged closer to me as the alght wore on ill didn't realize that I was combing my fingers through his hair as I talked until I not ced leb staring at my hand

I folded my arms across my body.

Finally Jeb vawned a huge yawn that had me and Jacille doing the same

"You tell, a good story Wanda," Jab said when we were at done stretching.

"it's what I did before I was a teacher at the university in San Diego. I taught history."

"A teacher" leb repeated, excited "Well ain't that amazin't There's something we could use around here. Mag's girl Sharon does the teaching for the three kids, but there's a lot she can't below ith She's most comfortable with moth and the like History, now."

"I only aught our history," I interrupted. Waiting for him to take a breath wasn't going to work it seemed. "I wouldn't be much help as a teacher here. I don't have any training."

"Your history is better than nothing. In tigs we human folks ought to know, seeing as we live in a more populated universe than we were aware of."

"But I wasn't a real teacher," I told him desperate Did be honestly think anyone wanted to hear my voice let alone listen to my stories? "I was sort of an honorary professor, almost a guest lecturer. They only wanted me because — we hectures of the story that goes along with my name."

"That's the next one I was going to ask for " Job said complacently." We can talk about your teaching experience later. Now — why did they call you Wanderers I we heard a bunch of odd ones. Dry Water Fingers to the Sky Falling Upward — all mixed in of course with the Pams and the Jims. I tell you, it's the kind of thing that can drive a man crazy with curiosity."

I wasted till I was sure he was done to begin. "Well, the way it usual works is that a soul will try out a planet or two — two sithe average — and then they'll settle in their favorite place. They just move to new hosts in the same species on the same planet when their body gets close to death. It's very disorienting moving from one kind of body to the next. Most souls really hate that Some never move from the planet they are born on. Occasionally, someone has a hard time finding a good fit. They may try three plane's. I met a soul once who dibeen to five before held settled with the Bats. I liked it there. I suppose that's the closest live ever come to choosing a planet. If it hadn't been for the blindness..."

"How many planets have you lived on?" Jamie asked in a hushed voice. Somehow, while I d been talking, his hand had found its way into mine.

"This is my ninth." I told him squeezing his fingers gent v

"Wow, nane!" he breathed.

That's why they wanted me to teach. Anybody can tell them our statistics but I have personal experience from most of the planets we've—taken. I have deat that word, hut it don't seem to bother Jamie. "There are only three I've never been to—we'll now four. They just opened a new world."

I expected leb to jump in with questions about the new world or

the ones I'd skipped, but he just played absently with the ends of his beard

"Why did you never stay anywhere?" Jamie asked

"I never found a place I likeli enough to stay"

"What about Earth? Do you think you II stay here?"

I wanted to smale at his child's confidence—as if I were going to get the chance to ever move on to another host. As if I were going to get the chance to live out even another month in the one I had

"Earth is very interesting" I marmured. "It's harder than any place I've been before:"

"Harder than the place with the frozen air and the claw beasts?" he asked

"In its own way yes." How could I explain that the Mists Planet only came at you from the outside. It was much more differ it to be attacked from within

Attacked, Melanie scoffed.

I yawned it wasn't actually thanking of you. I tolo her I was thinking of these unstable emotions, always betraying me. But you did affack me. Pushing your memories on me that way

I rearries my resson she assured me dryly. I could feel how intensely aware she was of the hand in mine. There was an emotion slowly building in her that I didn't recognize. Something on the edge of anger with a hinr of desire and a portion of despair.

lealousy, she en. ghtened me.

Jeb yawned again "I'm being downright rude I guess. You must be bushed — walking all over today and then me keepin you up haif the night to king. Ought to be a better host. C'mon, Jamie let's go and let Wanda get some sleep."

I was exhausted. It felt as rott had been a very long day, and, from Jeb's words, perhaps that wasn't in my (maginal on

"Okay Uncle Job." amie ji mped lightly to his feet and then of fered his hand to the old man

"Thanks, kid." Jeb groaned as he got up. "And thanks to you too." he added in my direction. "Most interesting conversation I ve had in the well probably forever. Rest your voice up. Wanda, because my curiosity is a powerful thing. Abothere he is. Bour time."

On vithe 1 did I hear the so, nd of approaching consteps. Automatically, I shrank against the wall and scooted further back into the cave room, and then fell more exposed because the moonlight was brighter inside.

I was surprised that this was the first person to turn at for the night, the corrider appeared to he ise many

"Sorry Jeb. I got to talking will. Sharon and then a sort of dezed off."

It was impossible not to recognize this easy gentle voice. My stom ach rolled unstable, and I wished it were empty.

"We drain reven notice. Doe " leb said." We were having the time of our lives here. Someous you ill have to get her to all you some of her stories. I great state Not too ght, though She's got to be presty worn out. I'd bet. We lisee you in the morning."

The doctor was spreading a mar out in front out he cave entrance, just as Jared had

"Keep an eye on this." I be said laying the gorn beside the mar

"Are you okay, Wandar" lam it asked. You're shaking "

I hadn't realized it but my whole body was quivering. I didn't an swer him — my throat telt swollen shut.

"Now now I Job said in a soothing voice.", asked Doc if he minded taking a shift. You don't need to worry about anything. Doc's an homorable man."

The doctor smiled a sleepy smile. "I'm not going to hart you Wanda is it? I promise I if just keep watch while you sleep."

I but my ip, and the quivering didn't step

Jub second to think everything was settled though, "Night, Wanda Night Doc" he said as he started back down the na...

Jamie hestated looking at me with a worned expression. "Doc's okay," he promised in a whisper

"C'mon, boy it s late."

Jamie hurried off after Jeb.

I walched the doctor when they were gone walting for some change. Doc's relaxed expression tidal toware though and he drant touch the gunotile structured his long frame out on the mail is calves and leet hanging of the end Lying down the hoxed much smaller he was so rail thin.

"Good night." he murmured drowsily

Of course I didn't answer I watched him in the duil moonlight, timing the rise and fail of his chest by the sound of the pulse thiidding in my ears. His breathing slowed and got deeper and then he began to quietly snote.

It could have been an act, but even if it was, there wasn't much I could do about it. Shortly I crept deeper into the room, the I feet the edge of the mattress against my back. I'd promised myself that I would not disturb this place, but it probably wouldn't burt anything if I just called up on the foot of the bed. The floor was rough and so hard.

The sound of the doctor's soft snoring was comforting even if it was put on to calm me at least I knew exactly where he was in the darkness.

Live or die I figured I might as well go ahead and sleep. I was dog tired, as Melanie would say I let my eyes close. The mattress was softer than anything I is touched since coming here. I relaxed, sinking in .

There was a low shiftling sound in was inside the room with me. My eyes popped open and I could see a shadow between the moonative-Inglandime Outside the doctor's shores continued analyterrupied.

Confessed

he shadow was huge and misshapen. It loomed over me, topheavy, swinging closer to my face.

Ish nk I meant to scream but the sound got trapped in my throat, and all that came out was a breathless squeak

"Shh it's just me " Jamie whispered. Something bulky and round ish rolled from his shoulders and propped softly to the floor. When it was gone I could see his true, lithe shadow against the moonlight."

I caught a few gasps of air my hand clutching at my throat

"Sorry" he whispered, sitting down on the edge of the mattress. "I guess that was prefty stupic. I was trying not to wake Doc. —I didn't even think how I would scare you. You okay?" He patted my ankle, which was the part of me closest to him.

"Sure," I haffed, st.,, breathless.

"Sorry," he muttered again.

"What are you doing here Jamie' Should'it you be asleepe"

"That's why I'm here I note to was snoring the you wouldn't believe. I couldn't stand it anymore." His answer didn't make sense to me "Don't you usua y sleep with Jeb?"

Jamie yawned and bent to unit eithe bulky bedrouble didropped to the fluor. "No, I askally sleep with Jared. He doesn't shore. But you know that."

I did.

"Why Jon't you sleep in Jared's room, then? Are you afraid to steep alone?" I wouldn't have biamed him for that It seemed like I was constantly terrified here

"Afraid," he grambled offended. "No. This is lared a room. And mine."

"What?" I gasped. "Job put me in lared's room?"

I couldn't believe it. Jaren would kill me. No. be would kill first, and then he would kill me.

"It's my room, too. And I told Jeb you could have it."

"Jared will be fit nous," I whispered

"I can do what I want with my toom," Jamie muttered rebell ously, but then he bit his lip. "We won't tell him. He doesn't have to know."

I nodded. "Good idea."

"You don't mind if I sieep in here, do your Unite Jeb's really oud,"

"No I don't mind But Jame I don't think you should "

He frowned trying to be tough instead of hart. "Why nor?"

"Because it's not safe. Sometimes people come looking for me at night."

His eyes went wide, "They do?"

"Jated a ways had the gan - they went away"

"Who?"

"I don't know — Kyle sometimes. But there are sure violitiers who are still here."

He nodded "All the more reason why I should stay Doc might need help"

"Jamie --- "

"I'm not a kid. Wanda. I can take care of myself."

Obviously, arguing was only going to make him more stabborn. "At least take the bed," I said, surrendering "I a sleep on the floor. It's your room."

"That's not right. You're the guest,"

a shorted quietty "Ha No, the bed is yours."

"No way." He lay down on the met folding his arms tightly across his chest

Again, I saw that arguing was the wrong approach to take with Jamie Well this one I could rect fy as soon as he was asleep Jamie stept so deepty it was almost a Lima. Melanie could carry him anywhere once he was out.

"You can use my priow." he totalme patting the one next to the side where he lay "You don't need to scrunch up at the bottom there."

I sighed but crawled to the top of the bed

"That's right," he said approxingly. "Now, could you throw me Jared's?"

I has lated about to reach for the pillow under my head, he jumped up, leaned over me, and snatched the other pulow. I sighed again

We lay in shence for a while listening to the low whistle of the doctor's breathing.

"Doc has a nice shore, doesn't her" Jamie whispered

"It won't keep you up," I agreed

"You tired?"

"Yeah."

"Oh."

I waited for him to say something more, but he was quiet

"Was there something you wanted?" I asked.

He didn't answer night away, but I could feel him struggling, so I watted.

"If I asked you something, would you tell me the truth-"

It was my turn to besitate "I don't know everything." I hedged

"You would know this When we were walking — me and leb he was telling me some things. Things he thought, but I don't know if he's right."

Meian e was suddenly very there in my head

Jamie's whisper was hard to hear quieter than my areathing. "Uncle leb thinks that Me anie in ght still be alive. Inside there with you I mean."

My lame Melanie sighed.

I said nothing to either of them.

"I didn't know that could happen. Does that happen?" His voice broke and I could hear that he was fighting lears. He was not a boy to dry and here I digneved him this deeply twice in one day. A pain pierced through the general region of my chest.

"Does it Wandar"

Te chim Please iec him that I love him

"Why won't you answer mar" Jamie was really crying now but trying to muffle the sound.

I crawled off the bed, squeezing into the hard space between the mattress and the mat, and threw my arm over his shaking chest. I leaned my need against his hair and tert his tears, warm on my neek.

"Is Melanie st., a ive. Wandar Pleaser"

He was probably a tool. The old man could have sent him last for this. Jeb was smart enough to see how cashly amie broke through my defenses. It was possible that Jeb was seeking confirmation for his theory, and he wasn't against using the boy to get it. What would Jeb do when he was certain of the dangerous truth? How would he use the information? I undn't think he means the harm, but could I trust my own unigneest. Humans were decent, treatherous creatures. I couldn't anticipate their darker agencies when such things were unthinkable to my species.

Jamie's body shook beside me.

He's suffering. Melante cried. She battered net ectually at my control.

But I couldn't blame this up Melanie in turned out to be a ruge mistake. I knew who was speaking now.

"She promised she would come back, didn't shee!" I marm red "Whald Meranic break a promise to you?"

Jamie slid his arms around my waist and clung to me for a long time. After a few minutes, he whispered "Love you Met"

"She loves you loo. She's so happy that you're here and sale "

He was such, long enough for the tears on my skin to dry leaving a fine, salty dust behind.

"Is everybody like that?" Jamie whispered long after I thought he'd fallen asleep. "Does everybody stay?"

"No." I told firm sadly "No. Melanie is specia."

"She's strong and brave."

"Very"

"Do you think " He paused to sniff "Do you think that may be Dad is still there too?"

I swanowed, trying to move the lump faither down my throat. It didn't work. "No, Jamie. No. I don't think so. Not like Melanie is."

"Why?"

"Because he brought the Seekers looking for you. Well, the soul inside him did. Your father wouldn't have let that happen if he were still there. Your sister never let me see where the cabin was a she aidn't even let me know that you existed for the longest time. She didn't bring me here until she was sure that I wouldn't hurt you."

It was too much information. Only as I finished speaking did I realize that the doctor wasn't snoring anymore. I could hear no noise from his breathing. Stupid. I cursed myse functionally

"Wow," Jamie said.

I whispered into his ear so close that there was no way the doctor could possibly overhear. "Yes, she's very strong."

lattice strained to bear me, frowning and then gianced at the opening to the dark ball. He must have realized the same thing I had, be cause he turned his face to my ear and whispered back softer than before. "Why would you do that? Not hart us? Isn't that what you want?"

"No. I don't want to hart you,"

"Why?"

"Your sister and I have—spent a lot of time together. She shared you with me. And—I started to—to love you too."

"And Jared, too?"

I gritted my reeth for a second, chagrined that he had made the connection so easily. "Of course I don't want anything to hart Jared, either."

"He hates you," Jamie fold me, plainly grieved by the fact

"Yes. Everyone does." I sighed "I can't blame them."

"Jeb doesn't. And I dont."

"You might latter you think about it more."

"But you weren't even here when they took over You didn't pack

my dad or my mom or Melanie. You were in outer space then, right?"

"Yes but I am what I am. Jame I did what souls do I ve had many bosts before Me an e. and nothing's stopped me from — taking lives."

Again and again. It's how I live."

"Does Merante bate you?"

I thought for a minute. "Not as much as she used to."

No 1 don't nate you at all Not arrymore

"She says she doesn't hate me at all anymore "I murm" red almost silently.

"How . . . how is she?"

"She's happy to be here. She's so happy to see you. She doesn't even care that they're going to kill us."

Jamie stiffened under my arm. "They can't Not if Meas still alive"

You be apset from Melanie complained. You widn't have to say that It won't be any easier for him if he's unprepared

"They won't believe that Jamze" I whispered "They if think I m lying to trick you. They II just want to kill me more if you to them that. Only Seekers lie."

The word made him shudder

"But you re not lying. I know a " he said after a moment.

I shrugged.

"I won't let them kill her."

His voice, though quiet as a breath, was herce with determination. I was paralyzed at the thought of him becoming more involved with this situation with me. I thought of the barbarians he lived with. Would his age protect him from them if he tried to protect me? I doubted it. My thoughts scrambled, scarching for some way to dissuade him without triggering his stubbornness.

lamie spoke before I could say anything, he was sudden y calm, as if the answer was plain in front of him. "Jared will think of something. He always does."

"lared won, be leve you rither. He ll be the angrest of them a !"

"Even if he doesn't believe it he II protect her Just in case."

"We'll see," I mattered 1 d find the perfect words later — the argument that would not sound like an argument

Jamie was quiet thinking. Eventually, his breathing got slower, and his mouth fell open. I waited until I was sure he was deeply under, and then a crawled over him and very carefully shifted him from the floor to the bed. He was heavier than before that I managed. He didn't wake.

I put Jared's pill ow back where it belonged, and then stretched out on the mat.

Wen, I thought, I just himed miself out of the frying pan. But I was too fired to care what this would mean tomorrow. Within seconds. I was unconscious.

When I woke the crevices in the ceiling were bright with echoed sanaght, and someone was whisting

The whistling stopped

"Finally," Job muttered when my eyes fluttered.

I roued onto my slot so that I could now at him as I moved Jamie's hand's id from my arm. Sometime in the night he must have reached out to me — well, not to me, to his sister

leb was leaning against the natural rock door frame his arms to ded across his host "Morning," he said "Get enough sleep?"

I stretched, decided that I test acceptably resieu, and then nodited "Oh, don't give me the saem treatment again" he complained scowling.

"Sorry," I marmured "I slept well thank you"

Jamie stirred at the sound of my voice

"Wanda/" he asked

I was recallously touched that it was my silly wekname that he spoke on the edge of sleep.

"Yes?"

Jam e bt used and pulled his tangled hair out of his eyes. "Oh, hey, Uncle Jeb."

"My room not good enough for you kid?"

"You snote real loud," Jamie said, and then yawned.

"Haven't I taught you anything?" Jeb asked him. "Since when an you let a guest and a lady sleep on the floor?"

Jamie sat up sudgen y, staring around disoriented. He frowned

"Done upset him." I tora leb. "He insisted on taking the mat. I moved him when he was asteep."

Jamle sported "Mel always used to do that, too."

I widened my eyes slightly at him, trying to convey a warning

Jeb chuckled. I looked up at him, and he had that same pouncing cat expression he d had yesterday. The solved puzz e expression. He walked over and kicked the edge of the mattress.

"You've already missed your morning class. Sharon's bound to be testy about that, so get a move on."

"Sharon is a ways testy." Jamie complained, but he got to his feet quickly.

"On your way, boy."

Jamie looked at me again, then he turned and disappeared into the hall

"Now," Jeb said as soon as we were alone "I think all this babysitting nonsense has gone on long enough. I'm a busy man. Everyone is bisy here—too busy to sit around playar guard. So today you're going to have to come along with me while I get my choices done."

I felt my mouth pop open.

He stared at me, no smile.

"Don't look so terrified," he grambled. "Your be fine." He patted his gun. "My house is no place for babies."

I couldn't argue with that I took three quick deep breaths, trying to steady my nerves. Blood puised so loudly in my ears that his voice seemed quiet in comparison when he spoke again

"C'mon, Wanda, Day's wasting."

He turned and stomped out of the room.

I was trozen for a moment, and then I surched out after him. He wasn't builfing — he was already invisible around the first corner. I raced after him, horrifica by the thought that I might run into someone else in this obviously inhabited wing. I caught up to him before he reached the big intersection of the tunnels. He aidn't even look at me as I slowed beside him to match bis pace.

"Bout time that northeast field was planted. We' have to work the soil first. Hope you don't mind getting your hands carty. After we're done I a see that you get a chance to clean yourself. p. You need a "He sniffed pointedly, then laughter.

I feat the back of my neck get hot but I ignored the last part. "I

don't mind getting my hands dirty," I marrowred. As I recailed the empty northeastern ited was out of the way. Perhaps we would be able to work alone.

Once we got to the big plaza cave, we started passing humans. They all stared informated, as usual. I was beginning to recognize most of them, the middle aged woman with the long salt and-pepper braid. I had seen with the origation team yesterday. The short man with the round belly, thinning sandy hair, and ruddly cheeks had been with her. The athlet clooking woman with the caramel brown skin had been the one bent to the her shoc the first time I'd come out here during the day. Another dark skinned woman with thick hips and sleepy eyes had been in the kitchen, near the two black-haded children perhaps she was their mother? Now we passed Maggie she glowered at Jeb and turned her face away from me. We passed a pale stek looking man with white hair whom I was sure I'd never seen be fore. Then we passed Ian.

"Hey, Jeb." he said cheerfully "Whatcha up to?"

"Turning the soil in the east field," Jeb grunted.

"Want some he.p?"

"Gught to make yourself useful." Jeb muttered

lan took this as an assent and fell into step behind me. It gave me goose bumps, feeling his eyes on my back.

We passed a young man who couldn't have been many years older than Jamie — his dark hair stood up from his olive toned torehead like-steel wool.

"Hey, Wes," Ian greeted htm.

Wes watched in silence as we passed. Ian laughed at his expression

We passed Doc.

"Hey, Doc," Ian said.

"Ian " Doc nodded. In his hands was a big wad of dough. His sairt was covered with dark loarse flour. "Morning, Jeb. Morning, Wailda."

"Morning," Jeb answered.

I nodded uneasily

"See you round " Doc said, hurry ng off with his burden

"Wanda, huh?" Ian asked.

"My tdea" leb tota h m "Suits her I hink"

"Interesting" was all Ian said.

We finally made it to the northeastern held, where my hopes were dashed

There were more people here than there had been in the passageways—five women and nine men. They are stopped what they were doing and scowled, naturally.

"Pay emine in ind." Jeb murmured to me

Jeb proceeded to tollow his own advice the went to a jumbled plue of roots against the closest wall, shoved his gun through the strap at his walst, and grabhed a pick and two shovels.

I telt exposed having him so far away fan was just a step behind me. I could hear him breathing. The others in the room continued to glower their tooks still in their bands. I did it mass the fact that the picks and hoes that were breaking the earth could eas as be used to break a body. It seemed to me, in reading a tew of their expressions that I wasn't the only line with that idea.

Jeh came back and handed me a shovel. I gripped the smooth worn wooden handte teding its weight. After seeing the bloodlust in the humans' eves it was hard not to think of it as a weapon. I didn't like the idea. I doubted I could raise it as one even to block a blow.

leb gave Ian the pick. The sharp, blackened metal locked dead yinh hands. It took along will power not to skip out of range

"Let's take the back corner,"

At least Jeb took me to the least crowded spot in the long sunny cave. He had lan pulverize he hard baked dirt ahead of us while I alipped the cloop over and he for twed behind crushing the chunks into usable sor, with the edge of his shove!

Watching the sweat run down land lair skin. The diremoved his shirt after a few seconds in the Jrv scorch of the mirror light. The and hearing leb's gri need breaths behind me. I could see that I had the easiest job. I wished I had something more difficult to do something that would keep me from being distracted by the movements of the other humans. Their every motion had me cringing and finching

I couldn't do laws lot I didn't have the hick arm and back music es necees to really chew into the hard self. But I decided to do what

I could of Jeb's, prechopping the clous into smaller bits before I moved on It helped a little bit is kept my eves busy and tired me out so that I had to concentrate on making myself work.

In brought us water now and then. There was a woman—short and fair I discen her in the kitchen vesterday—who seemed to have the job of oranging water to the others, but she ignored us I an brought enough for three every time. I found his about face in regard to me ansettling. Was he tearly no longer intent on my death? Or just looking for an opportunity? The water always lasted tunny here suiturous and sia e—out now that taste seemed suspicious. I med to ignore the paranoia as much as possible.

I was working hard enough to keep my eyes busy and my mind numb I didn notice when we hat the end of the last row I stopped only when Ian did. He stretched, putting the pick overhead with two hands and popping his joints. I shield away from the raised pick, but he didn see I realized that everyone else had stopped too I looked at the fresh-turned dirt, even across the entire floor and realized that the field was complete.

"Good work" Jeb announced in a loud voice to the group "We'd seed and water tomorrow"

The room was fixed with soft charter and clanks as the tools were piled against the wall once more. Some of the talk was casual some was still tense because of me. Ian held his hand out for my shovel, and I handed it to him feeling my already low mood sinkinght to the floor. I had no doubt that I would be included in Jeb's "we". Tomorrow would be just as hard as today.

I looked at Jeb mourntaily and he was smiling in my direction. There was a smilleness to his grin that made me believe he knew what I was thinking — not only did he guess my discomish but he was enjoying it.

He winked at me, my crazy friend. I real zed again that this was the best to be expected from human friendship.

"See you romorrow. Wands," Ian caused from across the room, and laughed to humself.

Everyone stared.

Tolerated

t was true that I did not smell good.

I doos count of how many case I dispent here—was it more than a week now? more than two?—and all of them sweating into the same clothes I diworn on my disastrous desert free. So much said had dried into my cotton shirt that it was creased into rigid accordion wrinkles. It used to be pale volume now it was a splotchy, diseased looking print in the same dark purple color as the case floor. My short hair was crunchy and grit y I could be at standing out in what tangles around my head, with a sliff crest on top, the a cockatoo's. I badn't seen my face recently but I imagined at in two shades of purple case direct purple and heating bruse purple.

So I could understand Job's point—ves. I needed a bath. And a change of ciothes as well to make the bath worth the effort. Jeb offered me some of Jama's clothes to wear while mind dried, but I don't want to ruin Jama's few things by stretching them. Thankfully he didn't try to offer me anything of Jared's Tended up with an old

but clean flanne shirt of Jeb's that had the sleeves ripped off, and a pair of faded, holey cutoff sweatpants that had gone unclaimed for months. These were draped over my arm — and a bumpy mound of vielsmelling loosely molded chanks that Jeb claimed was homemade cactus snap was in my hand— as I followed Jeb to the room with the two rivers

Again we were not alone, and again I was miserably disappointed that this was the case. Three men and one woman—the sait and pepper bits d—were filling backets with water from the smaller stream. A loud splashing and laughing echoed from the bathing room.

"We'... ust wait our turn." Jeb told me

He leaned against the wall. I stood stiffly best le him, uncomfortably conscious of the four pairs of eyes on me though I kept my own on the dark hot spring roshing by underneath the porous floor.

After a short wait three women exited the bathing room their wet hair dripping down the backs of their shirts—the a bletic caramelskinned woman, a young blonde I didn't remember seeing before and Melanie's cousin Sharon. Their laughter stopped abruptly as soon as they caught sight of us

"Afternoon ladies." Jeb said touching his forehead as if it were the brim of a her

"Jeb." the caramel woman acknowledged arvly

Sharola and the other giclignored us

"Okay, Wanda," he said when they'd passed "It's all yours."

I gave him a gaam look, then made my way carefully into the black room.

I tried to remember how the floor went. I was stire I had a few feet before the edge of the water. I took off my shoes first, so that I could feel for the water with my toes.

It was ust so dark. I remembered the tinky appearance of the pool — ripe with si ggest one of what might lark beneath its opaque surface—and shi adered. But the longer I waited, the longer I would have to be here, so I put the clean clothes next to my shoes, kept the smelly soap and shuffled forward carefully until I tound the hp of the pool.

The water was cool compared to the steamy air of the oriter cavern. It felt nice. That didn't keep me from being terrified, but I could still

appreciate the sensation. It had been a long time since anything had been 200. Starting dressed in my dirty clothes. I waded in waist deep I could teel the stream's current swirl around my ankles hugging the rock. I was glad the water was not stagnant. If would be upsetting to survive fithy as I was a that were the case.

I crouched down into the ink until I was immersed to my shoulders. I ran the coarse soap over my contness thinking this would be the easiest way to make sure they were clean. Where the soap touched my skin, it burned mildly

I took off the soapy clothes and scrubbed them under the water. Then I tinsed them again and again until there was no way any of my sweat or tears could have survived, wrong them out and laid them on the I for beside where I thought my shoes were.

The soap ourned more strongly against my pare skin, but the sting was bearable because it means I could be clean again. When I was done lathering, my skin prickled everywhere and my scalp to it scaided. It seemed as if the places where the bruises had formed were more sensitive than the rest of me — they must so, have been there. I was happy to put the acidic soap on the rock floor and rinse my body again and again, the way I had my clothes.

It was with a strange in ingling of relief and regret that I stoshed my way out of the pool. The water was very pleasant, as was the feeling of clean it prickling skin. But I dhad qui elenough of the blindness and the things I could magine into the darkness. I felt around anni I tound the dry clothes, then I putted them quickly on and shoved my water withkled feet into my shoes. I carried my wet clothes in one hand and the scap gingerly between two fingers of the other.

Jeb la ighed when I emerged his eyes were on the soap in my cautious grasp.

"Smarts a bit don't fir We're trying to fix that" He held out his hand protected by the tail of his shirt, and I piaced the snap in it.

I don't answer his question because we weren't as nell diere was a Ine waiting silen which hid him — five people, all of them from the field turning.

Ian was first in line

"You look but or," he told me but a couldn't rell from his tone if he was surprised or annoyed that I did

He raised one arm extending his long pare fingers toward my neck. I findled away and he drapped his hand quickly

"Sorry about that," he muttered

Did he mean for scaring the now or for marking up my neck in the first place? I couldn't imagine to at he was apologizing for trying to kill me. Sore who still wanted me dead. But I wasn't going to ask. I started walking, and Job fell into step behind me.

"No, today wasn't that bad." Jeb said as we walked shrough the dark corridor.

"Not that bad," I marmared. After all I hadn't been margered. That was always a plus.

"Tomorrow will be even better" he promised "I always enjoy planting seeing the miracle of the lattle dead looking seeds having so much life in them. Makes me feel like a witherest oid gov might have some potential left in him. Even if it's only to be ferrilizer." Job laughed at his toke.

When we got to the big garden cavern Jeb took my elbow and steered me east rather than west

"Don't try to be me you're not hangry after an that digging," he said. "It's not my job to provide form service. You're list going to have to eat where everyone else eats,"

I grimaced at the floor our let bim lead me to the k tchen

It was a good abing the food was exactly the same thing as always because if miraculous via filet mighon or a bag of Cheetos had mate that zeo. I wou dn't have been able to taste a thing. It took at my concentration just to make myself swallow — I hated to make even that small solind in the dead silence that followed my appearance. The kitchen wasn't crowded just ten people lounging against the counters, eating the crough to is and drinking their watery soup. But I killed all conversation again. I wondered how long things could last like this.

The answer was exactly four days

It also took me that long to understand what Jeb was up to, what the motivation was behind his switch from the courteous host to the commudgeously taskmaster.

The day after turning the sould spent securing and irrigating the same ite a. It was a different group of people than the day before. I magnitude there was some kind of rotation of the chores here. Maggie

was in this group, and the catamet skinned woman, but I didn't learn her name. Mostly everyone worked in at ence. The silence telt unhateral — a protest against my presence.

fan work, d.w.th. s. when it was clearly not his rurn, and this bothered me.

I had to cat in the kilchen again Jamie was there and he kept the room from total silence. I kilew he was too sensitive not to notice the awkward bash but he deliberately is a fred it seeming to pretend that he and Jeh and I were the only people in the room. He chattered about his day in Sharon's class bragging as the about some trouble he digot ten into for speaking dut of turn, and complaining about the chores she dig ven him as put shinche leb chast sed him has thearted y. They both aid a very good job of acting norma. I had no acting ability. When Jamie asked me about my day the best I could do was stare itent y at my food and mamble one word answers. This seemed to make him sad but he cadn't push me.

At hight it was a different story — he wouldn't let me strip alking anti. I beyond to be allowed to sleep. Jamie had reclaimed his room taking Jareu's side of the bed and insisting that I lake his. This was very much as Malania remembered things, and she approved of the arrangement.

Joh did too "Notes me the trouble of finding someone to play gliard. Keep the gan close and done forget it's there" he told Jamie.

I protested again but both the man and the boy refused to listen to me. So lamie supprised the gain on the other side of his body from me, and a fretted and had nightmares about it.

The third day it chores. I worked in the katchen Jeb talight me how to kneed the coarse orea tidough how to lay that in round himps and let it rise and laier on how to feed he him in the bottom of the big stone oven when it was dark enough to let the smake ou

In the missile of the atternoon, leb left.

"I'm gunna get some more flour" he mattered playing with the strap that held the gun to his waist.

Their ree silent without who kneaded appressive is didn't look up. I was up to his a hows in the stickly dough, out I stated to scrape it off so I could follow him.

Teo granned flashed a look at the a loserying women and shook

his head at me. Then he spun are not and dashed out of the room before I could free myself.

I froze there no longer breathing I stared at the three women the young bonde from the bathing room. he salt and pepper braid and the heavy lidded mother—waiting for them, o realize that they could kill me now. No leb, no gain, my hands trapped in the glacy dough—nothing to stop them.

But the women kept on kneading and shaping, not seeming to realize this glaring truth. After a long, breathless momen. I star ou kneading again too My straness would probably alert them to the situation sooner than if I kept working.

leb was gone for an elemnity. Perhaps he had means that he needed to grand more flour. That seemed like the only explanation for his end less absence.

"Took you song enough" the salt-and pepper braid woman said when he got back, so I knew it wasn't list my imagination.

Jeb dropped a heavy burnap sack to the floor with a deep thad. "That's a lot of flour there. You try carry in it. Trudy."

Trudy snorted "I imagine it took a lot of rest stops to get it his far." Jeb grinned at her, "It sure did,"

My heart, which had been thrumming like a bird's for the entire episode settled into a less frant a rhythm.

The next day we were cleaning mirrors in the room that housed the combined Job told me this was something they had to do roughtly, as the combination of hum dity and dust caked the mirrors until the light was no dim to feed the plants. It was Ian working with us again who scaled the rickety wooden ladder while Job and I tried to keep the base steady. It was a difficult task, given Ian's weight and the home made adders poor by ince. By the end of the day my arms were I mp and aching.

I didn't even notice and we were done and heading for the katchen that the improvised hoisier Jeb a ways wore was empty

I gasped out word, my knees, ook ng like a start oo colt s. My body tottered to a halt

"What's wrong Wandar" leb asked, too innocent

I would have answered it lan haun't been right beside him watching my strang, behavior with last nation in his said blue eyes.

So I ust gave Job a wide-eyed look of mingled disbelief and reproach, and then slowly began walking beside him again shaking my head. Jeb chuckled.

"What's that about?" Ian muttered to Jeb. as if I were deaf

"Beats me " Jeb said he lied as only a human could, smooth and guileless.

He was a good har and I began to wonder if leaving the gun behind today, and leaving me gione yesterday, and all this effort forcing me into human company was his way of getting the killed without doing the job himself. Was the friendship all in my bead? Another her

This was my fourth day eating in the kitchen

Jeb. Ian, and I wasked into the long hot room — into a crowd of burnans chatting in low voices about the day's events—and nothing happened.

Nothing happened.

There was no sudgen silence. No one paused to stare daggers at me. No one seemed to notice us at all

Jeb steered me to an empty counter and then went to get enough bread for three. Ian lounged next to me casually turning to the girl on his other side. It was the young blonde — he caued her Pa ge

"How are things going? How are you holding up with Andy gone?" he asked her.

"I'd be fine if I weren't so worried," she told him biting her Lp.

"He II be home soon." Ian assured her "Jared always brings everynne home. He's got a real talent. We've had no accidents, no problems since he showed up. Andy will be fine."

My interest sparked when he mentioned Jared—and Melanie so somnoleni these days, stirred—but Ian didn't say anything else. He just patred Paige's shoulder and turned to take his food from Jeb.

leb sat next to me and surveyed the room with a deep sense of satisfaction plain on his face. I looked around the room, ioo, trying to see what he saw. This must have been what it was usually like here, when I wasn't around. Only today I didn't seem to bother them. They must have been tired of letting me interrupt their lives.

"Things are setting down," Ian commented to Jeb.

"Knew they would We're all reasonable folks here"

I frowned to myself

"That's true, at the moment," Ian said laughing. "My prother's not around."

"Exactly," Jeb agreed.

It was interesting to me that Ian counted himself among the real sonable folks. Had he not see that Jeb was unarmed I was burning with conserv, but I sou do't risk pointing thout in ease he hadn't

The meal continued as it had begun. My nevelty had apparently worn off

When the meal was over Jeb said I deserved a rest. He walked me at the way to my door, playing the gentieman again.

"Afternoon Wanda" he said, tipping his imaginary hat

I took a deep breath for prayery "Jeb. wait"

"Yes?"

"Jea." I hesitated trying to find a polite way to put it. "I we, maybe it's stupid of me, but I sort of thought we were friends."

I structurized his face, looking for any change that might indicate that he was about to he to me. He only looked kind, but what did I know of a har's tens?

"Of course we are, Wanda,"

"Then why are you trying to get me killed?"

Firs farry brows pulled together in surprise. "Now why would you think that, honey?"

I listed my evidence. "You didn't take the gun today. And yesterday you left me alone,"

Jeb granned "I thought you hated that gun."

I waited for an answer

"Wanda if I wanted you dead, you wouldn't have lasted that first day"

"I know" I muttered starting to teel embarrassed without under standing why "That's why it's a "so contuing"

leb laughed theerfully "No. I don't want you dead. That's the whose point kill. I've been getting them a used to seeing you around getting them to accept the situation without realizing it. It's like boiling a frog."

My forehead creased at the eccentric comparison

Jeb explained "It you throw a frog in a pot of boiling water it will hop right out. But if you put that frog in a pot of tepid water and

slowly warm it, the frog doesn't figure out what's going on ant... a's loo late. Boiled frog. It's past a matter of working by slow degrees."

I thought about that for a second—remembered how the humans had ignored me at lanch today. Jeb had gotten them used to me. The realization made the feet strangely hopeful. Tope was a silly thing the my sit ation, but it seeped into me anyway coloring my perceptions more brightly than before.

"Jeb≥"

"Yeah?"

"Am I the frog or the water?"

He laughed "Lil leave that one for you to puzzle over Self examination is good for the soul." He lai ghed again, louder this time as he turned to leave "No pun intended."

"Watt — can I ask one more?"

Sure I alsay it's your turn anyway latter all I ve asked you "

"Why are you my friend, Jeb?"

He pursed his lips for a second considering his answer

"You know I'm a curious man "he began and I nodded "Well. I get to watch your souls a lot, but I never get to talk with 'em. I've had so many questions just pring up higher and higher. Plus I've always thought that if a person wants to, he can get along with just about anybody. I like putting my theories to the test. And see here you are one of the nicest gais I ever met. It's real interesting to have a soul as a friend, and it makes the feel super special that I've managed it."

He winked at me, bowed from the waist, and waiked away

٠

Just because I now understood leb's plan at didn; make things easier when he escalated at

He never took the gun anywhere anymore. I didn't know where it was but I was grately, that Jamie wasn't steeping with it, at least it made me a little nervous to have Jamie with me unprotected, but I decided he was actually in less danger without the gun. No one would feel the need to hart him when he wasn't a threat. Best less no one came looking for me anymore.

Jeb star ed sending me on title errands. Run back to the kirchen

for another roll, he was still hongry. Go tetch a bricker of water, this corner of the field was dry. Pail Jamie out of his class, leb needed to speak with him. Were the spinach sprouts in yet? Go and clieck. Did I remember my way through the south caves? Jeb had a message for Doc.

Every time I had to carry out one of these simple directives. I was malsweary haze of fear I concentrated on being invisible and walked as quickly as I could willhout running through the I glittom's and the dark corridors. I ten led to high he walls and keep my eyes driwn. Occasionally, I would stop conversation the way I used to but mostly I was ignored. The only time I to fill mimediate danger of death was when I interrupted Sharon's class to get lating. The look Sharon gave me seemed designed to be tollowed by hostile action. But she let Ia me go with a nod a fet I choked out my whispered request, and when we were along the held my shaking hand and to 3 me Sharon looked the same way at anyone who in errorp outher class.

The very worst was the time I had to find Doc because lan ansisted on showing me the way I could have refused. I suppose that Johad In thave a problem with the arrangement and that meant Johardsted Ian not to kill me. I was far from combar able with test, a tout theory but it seemed the test was inevitable. I Joh was wrong it it usi Ian, then Ian would had his opportunity soon enough. So I went with Ian through the long black scuthern tunnel as if it were a trial by hire.

If ved through the first half. Doc got his message. He seemed insurprised to see lan tagging along beside me. Perhaps it was my imagination but I though they exchanged a sign fit antiglance. I half expected them to strap me to one of Docs at they at this point. These rooms continued to make me tee has sea ed.

But Doc ast thanked me and sent me on his way as if he were bit sy. I couldn't really tell what he was doing—the had several books open and stacks and stacks of papers that seemed to contain nothing bit sketches.

On the way back, curios ty overcome my fear

"Janz" I asked having a bit of cittle its saying the name for the first time.

"Yese" He sounded surprised that I diad fressed him

"Why haven't you killed me yet?"

He snorted, "That's direct"

"You could, you know Jeb might be annoved but I don't think held shoot you." What was I saying? It sounded the I was trying to convince him. I bit my tongue.

"I know," he said, his tone complacent

It was quiet for a moment a ust the sounds of our footsteps echoing toward muffled from the turnel walls

"It doesn't seem fair" Ian finally said. "I've been thinking about it a lot and I can't see how killing you would make anything right. It would be I ke executing a private for a general's war or mes. Now I don't buy all of feb's crazy theories in the would be nice to be leve sare but just because you want something to be true doesn't make to that way. Whether he's right or wrong, though you don't appear to mean us any harm. I have to admit you seem honestly tond of that boy. It's very strange to watch. Anyway, as ong as you don't put us in danger it seems. I cruel to kill you. What's one more trusht in this piace?"

I though, about the word *maps* for a moment. It might have been the trues, description of me I diever heard. Where had I ever fit in a

How strange that can of all the humans should have sich a surprisingly gentle interior. I didn't realize that *critety* would seem a negative to him.

He waired in silence while I considered a this

"It you don't want to kill me, then why did you come with me to day?" I asked

He paused again before answering.

"Im nor sure that "He hes tated "leb thinks things have calmed down but I'm not completely sure about that There is still a few people. Anyway. Due and I have been trying to keep an eye on you when we can Just in case. Sending you down the south tunnel seemed, we pushing your lack to me. But that's what Jeb does best the pushes luck as far as it will go."

"You you and Doc are trying to protect me-"

"Strange world, isn't n?"

It was a tow seconds before I could answer

"The strangest," I finally agreed

Compelled

nother week passed maybe two — there seemed little point in keeping track of time here where it was so irrelevant and things only got stranger for me.

I worked with the humans every day, but not always with Jeb. Some days Ian was with me some days Doc and some days only Jamie I weeded fields kneaded bread, and scrubbed counters. I carried water booked onton soup, washed clothes in the tar end of the black pool and burned my rands making that acidic soap. Everyone did their part, and since I had no right to be here. I tried to work twice as hard as the others. I could not earn a place. I knew that, but I tried to make my presence as light a burden as possible.

I got to know a little about the humans around me, mostly ast by listening to them. Hearned their names, at least. The caramer skinned woman was named Lily, and she was from Philadeiphia. She had a dry sense of humor and got along well with everyone because she never got ruffled. The young man with the bristly hack talk, Wes, stared at her a lot, but she never seemed to notice that. He was only naneteen,

and he if escaped from Eureka. Mon and. The sleeps eved mother was named I claim, and her two boys were Isa an and Freedom Trection had been born right here in the caves, delivered by Doc I duent see much at these three at seemed that the mother kept her children as separate from me as was possible in this imited space. The halding redictioned man was Truck's hisband in sinume was Goot frey I'ev were aften with another of ler man. Heath, who had been Ger free's best friend's nee early chilahona, the three had escaped the invasion together. The padled man with the worde hair was Walter He was sick but Dor didn, know what was wrong with him, there was no way to find out not without labs and tests and even it Doc could a approse the problem he had no medicine to treat it. As the symptoms progressed. Doc was starting to thank it was a form of cancer. It's planed me - to watch somethe act is and highrom something so easily hadd. We ter tired easily but was always cheerful. The white blond woman her eyes contrast ne y cark who d brought water to the others that first day in the field was Heidt. Travis. John San ev Ress Carol Violetta Ruth Ann - I knew as the names, at cast. There were thirty five harmans in the colony, with six of them go e on he raid fared included. Twenty nine humans in the caves now and one mostly unweatime a ich

I also learned more about my netabbors.

Ian a disvie shared the cave on my hall day alith the two real doors propped over the entrance. Ian had begun be oking with Weslin another correct or in protest of my presence here but he a moved back after a stituo nights. The other nearby caves had also gone vacant for a white Johns dime the occupants were alread of the which made me aught. Were twenty one rat leshakes alread of all me field mouse?

Now Page was back next coor in the cave she shared with her partner. Ancy whose absence she mourned. Life was with Heid in the first cave with the fowered sheets. Heath was in he second with the duct taped cardooard and Irads and Cook free were in the third aith as riped quit. Red and Violet a were one cave farther down the him. That more their privacy protected by a staitled and threadhare oriental carpet.

The fourth cave in this corridor belonged to Doc and Sharon, and he fifth to Mage 2, but none of these three has returned Doc and Sharon were partnered, and Maggre, in her rare moments of successive humor teased Sharon that it had taken the end of hi manity for Sharon to find the perfect man levery mother wanted a doctor for her daughter.

Sharon was not the girl I diseen in Melanic's memories. Was it the years of living alone with the door Maggie that had changed her into a more brightly colored version of her moliner? Though her relation ship with Doc was newer to this world than I was, she showed none of the softening effects of new love.

I knew the duration of that relationship from Jamie — Sharon and Maggie rare v torgot when I was in a room with them, and their conversation was guarded. They were still the strongest opposition, the only people here whose ignoring me continued to feel aggressively hostile.

I diasked Jamie how Sharon and Maggie had gotten here. Had they found leb on their own, beaten Jared and Jamie here? He seemed to understand the real question, had Melanie's last effort to find them been entirely a waste?

Jamie told me no. When Jared had showed him Melanie's last note explained that she was gone—in toos him a memerito be able to speak again after that word, and I could see in his face what this moment had done to them both—they digone to look for Sharon themselves. Maggie had held Jared at the point of an antique sword while he tried to explain it had been a close thing

It had not lake a long with Maggie and lared working together for them to decipher leas induce. The tour of them had gotten to the caves before I'd moved from Chicago to San Diego.

When Jam's and I spoke of Mc arise, it was not as difficult as it should have been. She was always a part of these conversations soothing his pain smoothing my awkwardness—though she had little to say She rarely spoke to me anymore, and when she did it was muted, now and then I wasn't sure if I really heard her or just my own idea of what she might think. But she made an effort for Jam's When I heard her it was always with him. When she didn't speak, we both felt her there.

"Why is Mc an e so quiet now". Jam e asked me lare one night. For once, he wasn't grilling me about Spiders and I re Tasters. We

were both tired. — i had been a long day pulling carrots. The small of my back was in knots.

"It's hard for her to talk. It takes so much more effort than a takes you and me. She doesn't have anything she wants to say that badly."

"What does she do all the time?"

"She listens. I think. I guess I don't know."

"Can you hear her now?"

"No."

I yawned and he was quiet I thought he was askeep. I drifted in that direction, too

"Do you think she'll go away? Really gone?" Jamie suddenly whispered. His voice caught on the last word.

I was not a liar, and I don't think I could have lied to Jamie + I were. I tried not to think about the implications of my feelings for him. Because what did it mean if the greatest love Fit ever felt in my nine lives, the first true sense of family, of maternal instanct, was for an alien life form? I shoved the thought away.

"I don't know," I told him. And then, because it was true, I added "I hope not."

"Do you like her, ke you like me? Did you used to hate her, ike she hated you?"

"I s different than now I like you And I never really hated her not even in the beginning. I was very afraid of her and I was angry that because of her I couldn't be like everyone else. But I ve always, a ways admired strength, and Melanie is the strongest person. I've ever known."

Jamie laughed "You were atraid of hers"

"You don't think your sister can be scary? Remember the time you went too far up the canyon, and when you came home late she threw a raging hissy fit, according to Jared?"

He chuckled at the memory I was pleased, having distracted him from his painful question,

I was eager to keep the peace with all my new companions in any way I could. I thought I was willing to do anything no matter how backbreaking or smelly, but it turned out I was wrong

"So I was thinking," Jeb said to me one day, maybe two weeks after everyone had "calmed down."

I was beginning to hale mose words from Jeb.

"Do you remember while I was saying about you maybe teachaig a little bere?"

My answer was curt. "Yes"

"Well, how 'bout #?"

I d do't have to think it through, "No."

My ref. sal sent an unexpected pang of guilt through me. I dinever refused a Calling before. It telt like a selfish thing to do. Oby our y though this was not the same. The souls would have never asked me to do something so suicidal.

He frowned at me scrunching his caterp har eyebrows together "Why not?"

"frow up you think Sharon would like that?" I asked him in an even voice. It was just one example, out perhaps the most forceful.

He nodded still frowning, acknowledging my point

"Its for the greater good." he grumbled.

I snorted. "The greater good? Wouldn't that be shooting must"

"Wanda, that's shorts ghted," he said, arguing with me as if my answer had been a senious attemp, at persuasion. "What we have here is a very unusual opport, bity for learning. It would be wasteful to squander that."

"I ready don't think anyone wants to learn from me. I don't mind talking to you or James."

"Doesn't matter what they want. Job insisted "It's what's good for them. I rec chocolate versus broccols. Ought to know more about the universe... not to mention the new tenants of our planet."

"How does a map them Jeb? Do you think I know something that could destroy me souls. Turn the tide? Job its over."

"It s not over while we're still here" he told meigring make I knew he was teasing me again. "I don't expect you to turn traiter and give as some super weapon. I last think we should know more about the world we live in."

I I nehed at the word tran it. "I couldn' give you a weapon it I wanted to Job. We don't have some great weakness, an Achilles hee No archenemies out, here in space who could come to your aid no viruses that will wipe us out and leave you standing. Sorry."

"Don't sweat it." He made a fist and tapped it playfully agen st my

arm. "You might be surprised though I told you it gets boring in here People might want your stories more than you think."

I knew Jeb would not leave it a one. Was Jeb capable of conceding defeat? I doubted it.

At mealtimes I usually set with Jeb and Jamie, if he was not in school or busy eisewhere Ian always sat near though not really with us. I could not busy accept the idea of his scat-appointed role as my bodyguard. It seemed too good to be true and thus, by hi man philosophy, clearly face.

A few days after I direfused Job's request to teach the humans "for their own good." Doc came to so by me during the evening mea-

Sharon remained where she was in the corner farthest from my usual place. She was alone today, without her mother. She didn't turn to watch Doc walking toward me. Her vivid hair was wound into a high burn so I could see that her neck was stiff, and her shoulders were hunched, tense and unliaj py. It made me want to leave a once before Doc could say whatever he means to say to me, so that I could not be considered in collusion with him.

But Jamie was with me, and he took my hand when he saw the famil at panicked look come into my eyes. He was developing an uncanny ability to sense when I was turning skittish. I sighed and staved where I was. It should probably have bothered me more that I was such a slave to this child's wishes.

"How are things?" Doe asked in a casual voice sliding onto the counter next to me

Jan a few feet down from us, turned his body so it looked like he was part of the group

I shrugged.

"We boiled soup today" Jamie announced. "My eyes are still stinging."

Duc held up a pair of bright red hands "Soap"

Jamie laughed. "You win."

Doc gave a mocking bow from the watst, then turned to me "Wanda, I had a question for you." He let the words trail off

I raised my eyebrows.

"West, I was wondering. Of a rithe different planets you're tainnifier with, which species is physically the closest to humalik hum."

I blinked "Why?"

"Just good out fashioned biological currosity. I guess I ve been thinking about your Flealers.— Where do they get the knowledge to or tetrather than just treat symptoms, as you said?" Doc was speaking louder than necessary, his mild voice carrying farther than usual. Several people looked up.— Trudy and Geoffrey, Lily, Walter

I wrapped my arms tightly around myself, trying to take up less space "Those are two different questions" I marmared

Doc smiled and gestured with one hand for me to proceed Jamie squeezed my hand

I sighed "The Bears on the Mists Planet probably."

"With the claw beasts+" Jamie whispered.

I nedded.

"How are they similar?" Doc procided.

I rolled my eyes, feeling Jeb's direction in this, but continued "They're close to mammals in many ways. For warm blooded. Their blood isn't exactly the same as yours, but it does essentially the same job. They have similar emotions, the same need for societa, interaction and creative outlets —"

"Creative." Doc leaned forward, fascinated — or feigning fascination. "How so?"

I woked at Jamie "You know Why don't you tell Door"

"I might get it wrong."

"You won't."

He looked at Doc who nodded.

"Well, see, they have these awesome hands" Jamie was entities astic almost immediately. "Sort of double-jointed—they can cutl both ways." He flexed his own fingers, as if trying to bend them back ward. "One side is soft like my pa m, but the other side is like razors. They cut the ice—ice sculpting. They make rittes that are a crystal castles that never ment It's beautiful isn't it, Wandar." He turned to me for backup.

I nodded. "They see a different range of colors—the ice is full of the nodes. Their cities are a point of pride for them. They re always trying to make them more beaut ful. I knew of one Bear who we called a well, something like Gutter Weaver, but it sounds better in

that language, because of the way the ice seemed to know what he wanted and shaped itself into his dreams. I met him once and saw his creations. That's one of my most beautiful memories."

"They dream?" Isn asked quiet.y

I amiles wryly "Not as vividity as humans."

"How do your Healers get their knowledge about the physiology of a new species." They came to this planet prepared. I watched it start watched the term hall patients walk out of the hospital whole. " A frown etched a V shaped crease into Doc's narrow forehead. He hated the invaders. I se everyone, but in like the others he also enview them.

I didn't want to answer Everyone was listening to us by this point, and this was no pretty fairytale about ce-sculpting Bears. This was the story of their defeat.

Doc waited, frowning

"They they take samples," I mattered.

Ian grinned in understanding, "Alien abductions."

I ignored him

Doc pursed his lips, "Makes sense."

The suence in the room reminded me of my first time here

"Where did your kind begin?" Doc asked "Do you remember? I mean as a species do you know how you evolved?"

"The Origin." I answered, nodding. "We still we there It's where I was . . born "

"That is kind of special." Jamle added. "It is rare to meet someone from the Origin Lish to? Most souls try to stay there in ght, Wandaz." He didn't want for my response. I was beginning to regret answering his questions so thoroughly each hight. "So when someone moves on it makes them almost. — like a combitty? Or like a member of a royal family."

I could feel my cheeks getting warm

"It's a cool place." Jamie went on "Lots of clouds with a bunch of different colored layers. It's the only planet where the souls can live outside of a host for very long. The hosts on the Origin planet are really pretty too, with sort of wings and lots of tentacies and big silver eyes."

Doc was leaning forward with his face in his hands. "Do they remember how the host parasite relationship was formed: How did the colonization begin?"

Jamie looked at me, shrugging.

"We were always that way." I answered slowly, still anwilling, "As far back as we were not ligent enough to know ourselves, at least. We were discovered by another species—the vultures, we call them here though more for their personal lies than for their looks. They were not kind. Then we discovered that we could bond with them just as we had with our original hosts. Once we controlled them, we made use of their technology. We took their planet first, and then to lowed them to the Dragon Planet and the Summer World—lovely places where the Valtures had also not been kind. We started colonizing our hosts reproduced so much slower than we did and their life spans were short. We began exploring farther into the universe."

I trailed off conscious of the many eyes on my tace. Only Sharon continued to look away.

"You speak of it almost as if you were there." Ian noted quiet v "How long ago did this happen?"

"After dinosaurs lived here but before you did I was not there but I remember some of what my mother's mother's mother remembered of it."

"How old are von?" Ian asked, leaning toward me his brilliant blue eyes penetrating.

"I don't know to Earth years."

"An estimate?" he pressed.

"Thousands of years, maybe." I shritgged. "I lose track of the years spent in hibernation."

Ian leaned back, stunned.

"Wow, that's old," Jamie breathed.

"But in a very real sense. I'm younger than you." I marmared to him "Not even a year old. I see. Like a child all the time."

Jamie's ups polied up slightly at the corners. He liked the idea of being more mature than I was.

"What's the aging process for your kind?" Doc asked. "The natural life span?"

"We don't have one," I told him. "As long as we have a healthy host, we can live forever."

A low murmur—angree trightened disgusted I couldn't tel — swirled around the edges of the cave. I saw that my answer had been unwise. I understood what these words would mean to them.

"Beautifu." The low furious word came from Sharon's direction, but she hadn't turned.

Jamie squeezed my hand seeing again in my eyes the desire to bolt. This time I gently pulled my hand free

"I'm not hangry anymore" I whispered, though my bread sat bare y touched on the counter beside me. I hopped down and, hagging the wall, made my escape.

Jamie followed right behind me. He caught up to me in the big garden plaza and handed me the remains of my bread

"It was real interesting, honest." he told me: "I don't think anyone's too upset."

"Jeb put Doc up to this, oidn't he?"

"You tell good stories. Once everyone knows that they a want to hear them. Just like me and Jeb."

"What if I don't want to tell them?"

Jamie frowned. "Well I guess then you shouldn't. But it seems see you don't mind teiling me stories."

"That's different You', ke me" I could have said. You don't want to R., me, but the implications would have upset him.

"Once people get to know you they, all ake you lan and Doe do."

"Ian and Doc no not like me Jamie. They're just morbidly curt-

"Do so."

"Ugh " I groaned. We were to our room by now I shoved the screen aside and threw myself onto the mattress. Jamie sat down less force for the beside me and looped his arms around his knees.

"Don't be mad " he pleadou. "leb means well "

I grouned again

"It won't be so bad."

"Doc's going to do this every time I go in the kitches, isn't he?"

Jamie nouded sheepishly "Or Jan Or Jeb."

"Or you"

"We at, want to know"

I sighed and rougd onto my stomach. "Does Jeb have to get his way every single time?"

jamie thought for a moment, then nudded. "Pretty much yeah."

I look a big of e of bread. When I was done chewing I said. "I think I'll eat in here from now on."

"Ian's going to ask you questions, omerrow when you're weeding the spinach, Jeb's not making him — he wants to."

"Well, that's wonderful,"

"Youre pretty good with sarcasm. I thought the parasites. I mean the souls — didn't like negative humor.]" stithe happy shift."

"They duearn pretty quick in here, kid."

Jamie sughed and then took my hand. "You don't hate it here do you? You're not miserable, are you?"

His big chocolate-colored eyes were troubled

I pressed his hand to my tace "I'm fine." I told him, and it that moment, it was entirely the truth

Returned

I thout ever actually agreering to do it. I became the teacher leh

My "class" was informal. I answered questions every high, after dinner. I found that as long as I was willing to do this, Ian and Doc and Jeb would leave the alone during the day so that I could concentrate on my chores. We always convened in the kitchen. It ked to help with the baking while I spoke. It gave me an excuse to pause before answering a difficult question, and somewhere to look when a didn't want to meet anyone's eyes. In my head, it seemed fitting my words were sometimes upsetting, but my actions were always for their good.

I don't want to admit that Jamie was right. Obviously people didn't / At me. They couldn't I wasn't one of them. Jamie i ked me but that was just some strange chemical reaction that was far from rational leb liked me but Jeb was crazy. The rest of them don't have enther excuse.

No, they aidn't a ke me. But I hings abanged when I started to king

The tiest time I noticed it was the morning after I answered Doc's unlessions at January I was in the black bathing room, washing clothes with Trudy, Lily, and Jamie

"Could you hand me the soap please Wandaz" Trudy asked from my left

An electric current can through my body at the sound of my name spoken by a female voice. Numbly, I passed her the soup and then mised the sting off my hand.

"Thank you," she added.

"You're welcome" I marmured. My voice cracked on the last see lable.

I passed in vito the half a day later on my way to find Jamie before dinner

"Wanda," she said nodding

"Lily," I answered, my throat dry

Soon it wasn't just Doc and Ian who asked questions at night. It surprised me who the most vocal were exhausted Whiter his face a worr same shade of gray was endlessly interested in the Bars of the Singing World Heath usually's entiretting Trudy and Genttrey talk for him, was outspoken during these evellings. He had some fascination with Fire World and though it was one of my least favorite stories to tell he pepacred me with questions ant, he diheard every detail knew. Lily was concerned with the mechanics of things. wanted to know about the ships that carried as from planet to planet here pilots, their ruel. It was to Lily that I explained the cryotanks something they had all seen but few understood the purpose of Shy Wes usuany sating close to July asked not about other planets but about this one. How aid it works No money, no recompense for work - why aid our sous society not fall aparts I tried to explain that I was not so different from the nithe caves. Did we not all work without money and share in the products of our labor equals ?

"Yes," he interrupted me, shaking his head. "But it's different here. Jeb has a gun for the slackers."

Everyone looked at leb, who winked, and then they all laughed leb was in attendance about every other night. He didn't particle paid the just sat, houghtfully in the back of the room, occasionally grinning.

He was right about the entertainment factor odd vitor we all had legs the situation reminded me of the See Weeds. There had been a special title for entertainers there, like Comforter of Heater of Seeker. I was one of the Morpheliers on the transition to a teacher here on Earth had not been such a change profession-wise, at east. It was much the same in the kitchen after dark, with the smell of smoke and baking bread filling the room. Everyone was stack here, as good as planted. My somes were something new something to think about besides the usua — the same endlessity repeated sweaty chores, the same th rity five faces the same memories of other faces that brought the same grid with them the same tear and the same despair that had long been fam I ar companions. And so the kitchen was always full for my casual lessons. Only Sharon and Maggie were conspicuously and consistently absent.

I was in about my fourth week as an informal teacher when afe in the caves changed again.

The kitchen was crowded as was usual Jeb and Doc were the only ones missing besides the normal two. On the counter next to me was a metal tray of dark, doughy rolls, swiften to twice the size they'd surted at. They were ready for the oven, as soon as the current tray was done. Trudy checked every few minutes to make size nothing was burning.

Often I tried to get Jamie to task for me when he knew the story well 11 ked to watch the enthusiasm tight up his face, and the way he used his hands to draw pictures in the air. Long it. He di wanted to know more about the Dolphins, so I asked Jamie to answer her questions as well as he could

The humans a ways spoke with sadness when they asked about our newest acquisition. They saw the Dolphins as mirrors of themselves in the first years of the occupation. He disidark eyes, disconcerting an demeath her tringe of white nionalhair were right with sympathy as she asked her questions.

"They took more like huge dragor flies than fish, right Wandar" Jamle almost a ways asked for corroboration, though he never warred for my answer. "They re at leathery that ghowith three four or five sets of wings acpending on how old they are right? So they kind of fly through the water. It is ighter than water here, essionse. They

have twe, seven or nine legs depending on which gender they are, right. Wandar They have three different genders. They have ready long hands with tough strong fingers that can build all kinds of things. They make cities under the water out of hard plants that grow there kind of like trees but not really. They aren't as far along as we are right. Wandar Because they we never made a spacesh plot like telephones for communication. Humans were more advanced."

Trudy pulled out the tray of baked rolls, and I bent to shove the next tray of risen dough, into the hilt, smoking hore. It took a little jost ling and balancing to get to in list right.

As I sweated it from of the fire, I heard some kind of commotion outside the kitchen echolog down the fall from somewhere case in the cases. It was hard with all the random sound reverberations and strange acoustics, to judge distances here

"Hey " Jamie shouted bohind me and I turned ust in time to see the back of his head as he sprinted out he door

I straightened our of my crouch and took a step after I im, my instinct to follow

"Wan" Ign said "He ii be back. Tell us more about the Dolphins."

Ian was sitting on the counter beside the oven—a hot seat that I wouldn't have chosen—which made him close enough to reach out and touch my wrist. My arm fluiched away from the unexpected contact, but I stayed where I was.

"What's going on our there?" I asked I could still bear some kind of jabbening — I rhought I could hear famile's excited voice in the faix.

Ian shrugged "Who knows? Maybe Jah." He shrugged again, as it he wasn't interested enough to bother with figuring it but Nonchalant, but there was a tension in his eyes I didn't understand.

I was sure I would find our soon enough so I strugged, too, and started explaining the incred bly complex familial relationships of the Do pains white I he ped Trade stock the warm bread in plastic containers.

"Six of the nine grandparents so to speak traditionally stay with the larvae through their first stage of development with either

three parents work with "her six grandparents on a new wing of the fattily dwelling for the young to inhabit when they are mobile." I was explaining, my eyes on the rolls in my han is rather than my audience as usual, when I heard the gasp from the back of the room. I continued with my next senience automatically as I scanned the crowd to see who. I'd upset: "The remaining three grandparents are customarily involved..."

No one was upset with me. Every head was turned in the same or rection I was looking. My eyes skipped across the backs of their heads to the dark exit.

The first thing I saw was James slight figure, clinging to someone's arm. Someone so dirty head to toe, that he almost blended right in with the cave was. Someone too to I to be Jeb, and anyway, there was Jeb just behind James shoulder. Ever from this distance it could see that Jeb's eyes were narrowed and his nose wrinkled, as if he were anxious—a rare emotion for Jeb. List as I could see that James slace was bright with sheet joy.

"Here we go." Ian mattered beside me his voice barely aud the above the crackle of the flames.

The dirty man famile was still citiging to took a step forward. One of his hands rose slowly like an involuntary reflex and curied into a fier.

From the dirty figure came Jared's voice that, perfectly devoid of any inflection. "What is the meaning of this Job?"

My throat russed I tried to swa low and found the way blocked. I tried to breathe and was not successful. My heart drummed un evenly

larea. Melante's excitant voice was loud a scent shrick of clation. She burst into rad and lite inside my head. *Junid's home.*

"Wanda is leaching us all about the universe" famile babeled eagorly somehow not catching on to Jared's Early— he was too excited to pay attention, maybe.

"Wandor" jureu repeated in a low vince, hat was a most a snar.

There were more durty figures in the half be and him. I only noticed them when diey echood his sharl with an outraged pattering

A bound head rose from the frozen as hence. Page arrened to her feet. "Andy!" she cried, and stambled through the figures seated

around her. One of the dirty men stepped around Jared and caught her as site nearly fell, over Wes. "Oh. Andy" site sobbed, the tone of her voice reminding me of Melanies.

Pages outburst changed the almosphere momen arily. The scient crowd began to marmur most of them rising to their feet. The sound was one it welcome now as the majority went to greet the returned travelers. I tried to read their range expressions on their faces as they forced grins onto their lips and peeked furtively back at me. I realized after a long slow second—it me seemed to be congealing around me freezing me into prace—that the expression I wondered at was guilt.

"I is going to be okay, Wanda." Ian murmured under his breath

I granted at him wild vi searching for that same guilt on his face. I didn't find it inniv a defensive tightening around his vivid even as he stared at the newcomers.

"What the hell people?" a new voice boomed.

Kyle — easily ident hable by his size despite the grime - was shoving his way around Jared and heading toward — me

"You're acting it is I you as lies? Have you all gone crazy? Or did it lead the Seekers here? Are you all parasites now?"

Many heads acl, forward ashamed Only a few kept their chins stiffly in the air their shoulders squared Lily Trudy Heath Wesland frail Walter, of all people.

"Lasy Kyle" Walter said in his feet a voice

Ky eignored him the warked with deliberate's epsitoward me, his eyes, the same vibrant cohalt as his prother's glowing with rage. I couldn't keep my eyes on him though that kept returning to far ed's bark shape trying to read his camo floged face.

Melanie's love flowed through me ke a lake bursting through a dam. Jistracting me even more from the enraged barbarian closing the distance quickly.

lan's direct my view moving to place himsett in teent of me 1 strained my neck in the side in keep my view of lared civar

"Things change I while you were gone brother"

Nate hailed, face slack with disbelief. "Did the Seekers come then tane"

"She's not a danger to us "

Kyle ground his teeth together and from the corner of my eye, I saw him reach for something in his pocket

This captured my attention at last I cringed expecting a weapon. The words stumbled off my forigue in a choked whisper. "Don't get in his way, Ian."

Ian didn't respond to my plea. I was surprised at the amount of anxiety this caused me, at how much I didn't want him hurt. It wasn't the instructive protection the bone-deep weed to protect that I felt for Jame or even Jared. It list knew that Ian should hot be harmed trying to protect me.

By e's hand came back ip, and a light shone out of it. He pointed it at lank face, he did there for a moment, land.dn't ill neb from the light.

"So what then?" Kyle demanded putting the flashlight back to his pocket. "You're not a parasite. How did it get to you?"

"Calm down, and we li tell you all about it."

"No."

The contradiction aid not come from Kite but from behind him. I watched lared walk slowly toward us through the silent speciators. As he got a oser famile still clinging to his hand with a bewildered expression. I could read his face better under the mask of dirt. Even Me ante all but delinious with happiness at his safe return, could not misunderstand the expression of loathing there.

Jeb had wasted his efforts on the wrong people. It couldn't matter that Trudy or Lily was speaking to me, that I an would pit himself between his brother and me, that Sharon and Maggie made no bosule move toward me. The only one who had to be convinced had now finally, decided.

"I don't thank anyone needs to "aim down" Jarea said through his teeth. "Jeb." he continued not looking to see if the old man had tollowed him forward, "give me the gun."

The shence that to lowed his words was so tense I could fee. he pressure inside my ears.

From the instant I could clearly see his fact. It is known it was over I know what I had to do now. Meanine was in agreement. As quiet y as I could I took a step to the side and singhtly back, so that I would be clear of Ian. Then I closed my eyes.

"Don't happen to have it in me." Jeh draw ed

I peeked through narrowed eyes as Jared w., ried to assess the truth of Jeb's claim.

fared's preath whished angrily through his nostrils. "I"ne." he mattered. He took another step reward me. "It will be slower this way though. It would be more humane if you were to find that give tast."

"Please Jared, let's to k" Lin said, planning his feet firmly as he spoke aiready knowing the answer

"I think there's been too much talk." Jared growled. "Jeb lett this up to me, and I ve made my decision."

Jeb cleared his throat noisily Jared spun half-way around to look at him again.

"What," he demanded "You made the rue, Jeh."

"Well, now, that's true,"

ared turned back toward me "lan get or, of my way"

"We as we also to a sec," Joh wer ton "If you recall, the rule was that who ever the body belonged to got to make the decision."

A vein to fared's forthead pulsed visibly "And?"

"Seems to me the there's someone here with a claim just as strong as yours. Mebbe stronger."

lared stared straight ahead, processing this. After a saw moment, understanding flarrowed his brow. He moked down at the boy said hanging on his arm.

A the joy had drained from Jamie's face, leaving it pale and hor construck

"You can't, ared," he choked, "You wouldn't Wanda's good. She's my friend. And Mei. What about Mel? You lan't k... Mel! Please You have to: "He broke off his expression agon zed.

I closed my eyes again trying to block the picture of the suffering boy from my mind, it was already almost impossible not to go to him. I ocked my muscles in place promising myself that it wouldn't be plain if I moved now.

"So." leb said his tone fur two conversational for the moment, "you can see that Jamie's not in agreement 1 figs relies got as much say as you do."

There was no answer for so long that I had to open my eyes again.

Jared was staring at Jamie's anguished fearful face with his own kind of horror

"How could you let this happen. Job?" he whispered

"There is a need for some talk," Job answered "Why don't you take a breather first thought Maybe you in feel more up to conversation after a bath,"

lared g ared ba etully at the old man, his eyes fill of the shock and pair of the betrayed. I had only human comparisons for such a look. Caesar and Brutus, Jesus and Judas.

The unbourable tension lasted through another long minute, and then Jared shook Jamie's fingers oft his arm.

"Kyle," Jared barked turning and stalking out of the room

Kyle gavi. It's brother a parting grimace and tollowed.

The other darty members of the expedition went after them salen by Paige tacked securely under Andy's arm

Most of the other himans an those who had hung their heads in shame for admitting me into their society shuffled out behind them. Only James Jeb, and Ian beside me, and Irady, Geoffrey Heach, Lily. Wes, and Walter stayed.

No one spoke until the echoes of their footsteps faded away into shence.

"Whew!" Ian preathed "That was close. Nice thinking. Jeb."

"Inspiration in despetation. But we're not out of the woods yet." Jeb answered.

"Don't I know it You d'an't leave the gan anywhere obvious, did you?"

"Nope I figured this might be conun on soon "

"That's something, at least,"

Jam'e was trembing, alone in the space off by the exodus. Sur rounded by those I had to count as friends. I felt able to wark to his side. He three his arms around my waist, and I patted his back with shaky hands.

"It's okay," I field in a whisper "It's okay." I knew even a fool would hear the false note in my voice and Jamie was not a foor

"The won't hart you." Iam it said thick is struggling against the tears. I could see in his eyes. "I want let him."

"Shh," I murmured.

I was appared. I could tee that my face was fixed in anes of hor for lared was right. how could Job have let his happens If they Jik led me the first day here, before Jamie had ever seen me. Or that first week while Jared kept me isolated from everyone before Jamie and I had become friends. Or if I had just kept my mouth shut about Melanie. It was too are for all that My arms tightened around the child.

Melan'e was 18t as agreest. My poor party

I tord you it was a had idea to ted him every bing. I remineed her

What was it do to him now, when we are?

It is going to be terrible. He ll be traumainted on a scarred and newestated

Melanie interrupted me. Encugh I know I know Bul schar zan we doe

Not die, I suppose

Melante and I thought about the ake shood of our survival and felt despair.

Iso thumped Jamie on the back. I could feel the motion reverbetate through both our bodies.

"Don't agonize over it, k.d." he said. "You're not in this alone."

"They rejust shocked that's all "I recognized Trudy's alto voice behind me "Once we get a chance to explain they", see reason."

"See reason? Kyle?" someone hissed almost unintelligibly

"We knew this was coming " Jeb muritired. "Just got to weather it. Storms pass,"

"Maybe you ought to find that gun." Lily suggested calmly. "Tonight might be a long one. Wanda can stay with Heidi and me......"

"I think it high, be better to keep her somewhere else" can disagreed "Maybe in the southern tunne s+1 ll keep an eye on her Jeb wanna lend me a hand?"

"They woundn't look for her with me." Walter's offer was just a whisper.

Wes spoke over the last of Walter's words. "Till tag along with you Ian. There're six of them,"

"No." I finally managed to choke out. "No. That's not right. You

shouldn't fight with each other. You als belong here. You belong together. Not fighting, not because of me."

I putled Jamie's arms from around my waist holding his wrists when he tried to stop me

"I just need a minute to myself." I told him, ignoring all the states. I could feel on my tace. "I need to be alone." I turned my lead to find. Jeb. "And you should have a chance to discuss this without me listening. It is not fair.... having to discuss strategy in front of the enemy."

"Now, don't be like that." Jeb said

"Let me have some time to think Joh"

I stepped away from Jamie dropping his lands. A hand fellow my shoulder, and I eninged.

It was just lan. "It's not a good idea for you to be wandering around by yourself."

I leaned toward to m and tried to pitch my voice so low that Jamie wouldn't hear me clearly. "Why protong the thevitable? Will it get easier or harder for him?"

I thought I knew the answer to my last question. I ducked under Ian's hand and broke into a run sprinting for the exit.

"Wanda!" Jamie called after me

Someone quickly shashed him. There were no footsteps behind me. They must have seen the wisdom of artting me go.

The hall was bark and deserted. If I was allow I dibe able to cut around the edge of the big garden plaza in the dark with no one the wiser

In all my time here, the one thing I dinever found was the way out It seemed as if I diheen flown every tunnel aims and again, and I dinever seen an opening I hadn't eventually exprored in search of one thing or another at thought about it now as I crept through the deepest stadowed corners of the big cave. Where could the exit ber And I thought about this if I could figure that puzzle out would I be able to leave?

I comment think of anything worth waving for — certainly not the desert waiting outside, but also not the Seeker not the Healer not my Comforter, not my life before which had left such a shallow impression on me. Everything that really mattered was with me here. Jamie

Though he would kill me, Jared I couldn't imagine wairing away from either of them.

And Jeb Ian I had friends now Doc Trudy Lay. Wes. Waker Heath Strange humans who could eventons what I was and see some thing they didn't have to will. Maybe it was just curiosity, but regardless of that, they were will not side with me against the rest of their i ght kait family of survivors. I shook my heat in wonder as I traced the rough rock with my hands.

I could hear others in the cavern on the far side from me I didn't pause, they could not see me here, and I dijust found, he crevice I was looking for

After all, there was really only one place for me to go. Even if I could somehow have guessed the way to escape. I would still have gone this way I crept into the blackest darkness imaginable and but need along my way.

Undecided

felt my way back to my prison hole.

It had been weeks and weeks since I dibeen down this particular condoc. I haun't been back since the morning after jared had left and Jeb had set me tree. It seemed to me that while I lived and Jared was in the caves, this must be where I belonged.

There was no diminght to greet me now. I was tatriy sure I was in the last leg in the turns and twists were still vaguely familiar in let my left hand drug against the wall as low as I could reach, feeling for the opening as I crept forward. I wasn't decreed on crawling back *inside* the cramped hold but at least it would give me a reference point, let ting me know that I was where I meant to be

As a happened. I cadn't have the option of inhabiting my cell again.

In the same moment that my fingers brushed, he rough edge at the top of the hole, my foot hit an obstacle and I stumbled its ing to my knees. I threw my hands out to laten myself, and they landed with a

emach and a crackle breaking through something that wasn't rock and didn't belong here.

The sould start ed melithe inexpected object trightened mel Perhaps I'd made a wrong turn and wish t anywhere near my hole. Perhaps I was in someone's living space if ran through the inemory of my recent tourney in his head, wondering how I could have gotten so turned about. Meanwhile I is stened for some reaction to my crashing tail holding absolutely still in the darkness.

There was nothing—no reaction no sound. It was only dark and staffy and hained, as it always was and so silent that I knew I must be alone.

Carefully trying to make as a tle noise as possible 1 took stock of my surroundings.

My hands were stack in something, I pulled them free tracing the contours of what tea lake a cardboard box— a cardboard box with a sheet of thin crackly pristic on top that my hands had failen through. I telt around inside the box and found a ayer of more crackly plastic— small rectangles that made a loc of noise when I handled that if I retreated quickly afraid of drawing attention to myself.

I remembered that I'd thought I'd found the top of the hole. I searched to my left and found more stacks of cardhoard squares on that side. I fined to find the top of the stack and had to stand in order to do so — it was as high as my head. I scarched until I found the wall and then the hole exactly where I dithought it was. I fried to climb in to ascertain if it really was the same place——one second on that bowed floor and I would know it for certain——but I could not get any faither than—he opening. It, too, was crammed fail of hoxes.

Styrned I explored with my bands, moving back our into the hall I found I could go no deeper down the passageway it was entirely filled with the mysterious cardboard squares.

As I hunted along the floor trying to understand. I to the something different from the crowd of boxes. I was rough taone. I ke but lap, a sack the of something heavy that shifted with a quiet hissing sound when I nedged it. I kneaded the sack with my hands, less allitmed by the low biss than by the plastic crackle. It seemed the kelvic that this sound would alert anyone to my presence.

Suddenly it all came clear It was the small that did it. As I played with the sand-like material inside the bag, I got an inexpected whift of a tame or scent in took me back to my bare kitchen in San Diego to the low cup board on the left side of the silk. In my beau I could see so clearly the bag of uncooked rice, the plastic measuring cup I used to dole thought a rows of canned food behind it.

Once I realized that I was loughing a bag of rice, I understood. I was in the right piace after all. Hadn't Job salutthey used this piace for storage? And high alted just returned from a long raid? Now everything the raiders had stolen in the weeks they dibeen gone was damped in this out of the way piace, into it could be used.

Mony thoughts ran through my head at once

First I realized that I was surrounded by food. Not just rough bread and weak on on soup, but *food*. Somewhere in this stack there could be pean a butter. Chocola e thip cookies. Potato chaps. Cheetos.

Even as I imagined finding these things, rasting them again, being full for the first time since I dileft extinzation. I felt grifty for thinking of a land haunt risked his life and spent weeks hiding and stealing to feed me. This food was for others.

I also worked that perhaps this wasn't the entire had. What if they had more boxes to stowe Wield lated and Kyle be the ones to bring theme. It didn't take any imagination at all to partial the scene that would result if they found me here.

But wasn't that why I was here? Wasn't that exactly what I'd needed to be alone to think about?

I sacrached against the wall. The nice pag made a decent platow. I closed any eyes — unnecessary in the inky darkness — and settled in for a consultation.

Okay, Mel. What now?

I was glid to fire that she was still awake and alert. Opposition brought or thur strength. It was only when things were going well hat she drifted away.

Printings sile decided. What's most important to use Sidving a week.

Or Jamie?

She know the answer ante I athrmed signing out and The sound of my areath whispered back from the black walls

Agreed We con a probably last awhile if we let leb at d lan protect us. Will that help bim?

Maybe & and he be more han if we just gave up. Or if we let this drag on mits to have it end banks, which seems inevitable.

She didn't are that I could fee act scrambling around searching for alternatives.

Try to escape? I suggested.

threety say decided Besides is not terminated up an out there. What would we tell them?

We imagined it together—how would I explain my months of absencer, could be, make up some alternative story or say I bidn't remember. But I thought of the Seeker's skeptical race, her building ng eyes bright with suspicion and knew my incept attempts at subterfage would fail.

They dithink I took over Melanie agreed. They disake you out and put her in

I squirmed, as if a new position on the rock floor would take me turther away from the idea, and shuddered. Then I touowed the thought to its conclusion. She a ten them about that place at it he feekers would come.

The horror washed through as.

Right I comminded. So escape is out

Right, she whispered, emotion making her thought unstable

So the accession in squak or sion Whier harts bym ex .

It seemed that as long as 1 occased on practicalines I could keep at least my side of the discussion orangly businessisse. Melanic tried to mimic my effort.

In not sure. On the one oand inguals, the unger the three of us are cogether, the paraer our — separation would be for him. Then again of we didnot fight if we not gave up — he wow an whe that the differ betrayed by us.

I looked at both sides shott presented trying to be rational about it.

so quick bit we have to an our best not to use?

Con drawn high ing, she athronical green y

Fighting Fabalous I tried to imagine that muceting violence with

violence. Raising my hand to strike someone. I could form the words but not the mental picture.

You can ac it she encouraged I a help you

Thanks, but no thanks. There has to be some other way

I don't get vou, Wanda You've given up on your species entresy you're ready to die for my brother you're in love with the man cotte woo is going to kill its, and yet you won't let go of casions that are entresy impractical here.

I am who I am. Mex. I can't change that, shough everything ease may change. You had an in-yourself, allow me to do the same.

But if we're going to ---

She would have continued to argue with melibut we were interrupled. A scuffing sound, shoe against rock, echood from somewhere back down the condor.

I froze every function of my body arrested but my heart, and even that faltered jaggettive and a stened. I didn't have long to hope that I'd just an agried the sound. Within seconds. I could hear more quiet footsteps coming this way.

Me anie kept her cook whereas I was lost to partic

Get on your feet, she ordered.

Why?

You want hight but you can run You back to try something - for lamte

I started breathing again, keeping it conet and shallow Sloway I rolled forward till I was on the balls of my feet. Adrending occurred through my muscles, making them tingue and flex. I would be faster than most who would try to catch me, but where would I run to r

"Wandar" someone whispercu quietty "Wandar Are you here?
It's me."

His voice broke, and I knew him

"Jamie " I rasped "What are you doing! I told you I needed to be alone."

Relief was plain in his voice which he now raised from the whis put "Everybody is looking for you Well you know. Trudy and Lily and Wes. That everybody. Only we're not supposed to let anyone know that's what we're uoing. No one is supposed to guess that you're

m ssing Jeb's got his gun again. Ian's with Doc When Doc's free, he'll rafk to Jared and kyle. Everybody listens to Doc So you don't have to hide. Everybody's busy, and you're probably fired.

As Jamie explained, he continued forward until his fingers found my arm, and then my hand.

"I'm not really braing, amie I told you I had to think "

"You could think with Jeb there right?"

"Where do you want me to go? Back to Jared's room? This is where I'm supposed to be."

"Not anymore." The familiar stubborn edge entered his voice

"Why is everyone so busy?" I asked to distract him "What's Docdoing?"

My after priwas unsuccessful held do't answer

After a minute of silence I touched his check. "Look you should be with Jeb. Teil the others to stop looking for me. I'll just hang out here for a while."

"You can't steep here,"

"I have before."

I felt his head snake in my hand

"I'll go get mats and proows, at least."

"I don't need more than one."

"I'm not staying with fared while he's being such a jerk."

I grouned internally "Then you stay with Jeb and his snores. You belong with them, not with me."

"I belong wherever I want to be."

The inteat of Kyle finding me here was heavy on my mind. But that argument would only make Jamie fee responsible for protecting me.

"I'me. but you have to get feb's permission."

"Later I'm not going to big Jeb tonight"

"What is Jeb doing?"

Jamie didn't answer It was only at that point I realized he had deliberately not answered my question the first time. There was something he didn't want to tell me. Maybe the others were busy trying as find me. too. Maybe Jareu's homecoming had returned them to their original opinion about me. It had seemed that way in the kitchin, when they dihang their beads and eved me with farrive guilt.

"What's going on Jamie?" I pressed

"Im not supposed to be you," he mattered. "And I'm not going to." His arms wrapped tightly around my waist, and his face pressed against my shoulder. "Everything is going to be all right." he promised me, his voice thick.

I patted his back and ran my fingers through his tangled mane "Okay". I said, agreeing to accept his stience. After all, I had my secrets iton, didn't be "Don't be upser, Jamie. Whatever it is, it will a work out for the best. You're going to be fine." As I said the words, I willed them to be true.

"I don't know what to hope for "he was spered

As I stated into the dark at nothing in particular trying to understand what he wouldn't say, a taint glow caught my eye at the far end of the hallway — dim but conspicuous in the brack cave.

"Shirth." I breathed. "Someone is coming. Quick, hide behind the boxes."

Jamie's head snapped i p. toward the vellow light that was getting brighter by the second. I listened for the accompanying footsteps but heard nothing.

"I'm not going to have," he preathed "Get behind me Wanda"
"No!"

"Jame" Jared shouted I know youre back here!"

My legs telt hollow numb. Did it have to be Jared? It would be so much easier for Jamie at Kyle were the one to k in me

"Go away!" Jamie shouted back.

The yearswinght sped up and turned into a circle on the far war.

Jared stalked around the corner the lash ight in his hand sweeping back and forth across the rock floor. He was clean again, weating a faded red shirt I recognized in had hang in the room where I dilived for weeks and so was a familiar sight. His face was a so familiar in wore exactly the same expression it had since the first moment I'd shown up here.

The beam of the flashlight hat my face and blinded me, I knew the light reflected brill antily off the silver behind my eyes because I felt lamte jump — just a little start and then he set himself more from vithan before.

"Get away from it1" Jared roared.

"Sout up?" Jamie velled back. "You don't know her. Leave her alone."

He clung to me while i tried to unlock his hands

fared came on the a charging his. He graphed the back of jamie's shirt with one a and and vanked him away from mis. He held on to his handful of fabric shalling the boy while he yelled.

"You re being an idiot. Can't you see how it's using you?"

Institutively. I shoved myself in a the tight space between them. As I is intended, my advance made him drop Jamie it is do't want or need what else happened in the way his fam par sinell assaulted my senses, the way the contours of his chest felt under my hands.

"Leave Jamie alone " I said wishing for once that I could be more like Melanie wanted me to be that my hands could be hard now that my voice could be strong

Fit snatched my wrists in one hand and used this inverage to hard me away from him into the wall. The impact caught me by stript so knocked the breath out of me. I rebounded off the stone will to the floor tanding in the poxes again making another critic e crash as I shredded through more cellophane.

The pillse thousand in my head as I lay awkward vibent over the boxes, and for a moment. I saw strange lights pass in front of my eyes.

"Coward" Jamie screamed at Jared. "She wouldn't hurt you to save her own life. Why can't you leave her along?"

I heard the boxes shating and felt Jamie's hands an my arm "Wands? Are you okay, Wands?"

"time" I history gnoring the throbbing in my head. I could see his any our face hovering over me in the glow of the flashlight, which lared must have propped. "You should go now famile." I whispered "Run."

Jamie shook his head fiercely.

"Stay away from 1." Jared bellowed

I watched as lared grabbed, am e's shoulders and yanked the boy up from his prouch. The boxes this displaced to lion mellike a small avalanche. I realed away covering my head with my arms. A heavy one caught me right between the same der blades, and I cried out in pain

"Stop hurting her!" Jamie howled

There was a sharp crack, and someone gasped

I straggled to pain it visits our from under the heavy carron in sing up on my elbows dizzily.

Jared had one hand over his nose, and some hing dark was bozing down over his lips. His eves were wide a thisurprise Jamie stood in trent of him with both hands concludinto hits latter our scowl on his face.

Jamie's scow, melled slowly white Jared stated at him in shock that took as place—that and a betraval so deep that it invaled Jared's expression in the kitchen.

"You aren't he man I thought you were " jartie whispered. He looked at lared as though lared were very far away as if there were a way between hem and lame was offer visionated on his wide.

Jamie's eyes started to swim, and he't trived his head, aslumed of showing weakness in front of Jared. He wasked away with quick jerky movements

We tried. Me anie hough sac v. Her heart ached after the child even as she longed for me to return my eyes to the man. I give her what she wanted.

Jared wasn't looking at melittle was staring at the blackness into winch Jamie had disappeared it schand still covering his ruse.

"Aw again to " he suddenly should "Jamie Get back here."

There was no answer

lared threw one break giance in thy direction. I tringed away though his firty see new to have trailed in then schoped up the flashingh, and stomped after Jamie, it is king a box out of this way.

"I'm sorry lokay? Donet cry kit "The cancerous more anary apendgles as he mined the corner and left me sying in the darkness."

For a long momen, it was all I could do to preathe. I concentrated on the air flowing in their out, then in After I tel. I had that part mastered I worked on getting up off the floor. It took a few seconds o remember how to move my legs, and even, hen they were shaky and threatened to collapse under niel so I sat against the wall again so I ng over. It is found my next a red priow. I slamped here and took stock of my condition.

Northing aus broken except marbe lared single a shook my head slowly Jamie and Jared should not be fighting I was causing

276 STEPHEN E MEYER

them so much turnion and unhappiness. I sighed and well back to my assessment. There was a vost sore spot in the center of my back, and the side of my face to a raw and moist where a had hit the wall a stung when I outboulit and left warm fold on my fingers. That was the worst of it chough. The other bruises and scrapes were mid.

As I real zed that I was unexpected a overwhelmed by relief I was a tree Jaree had had his chance in kit me and he had not used it. He digone after Jan is instead to make things right between them so whatever damage I was doing to their relationship at was probably not irreparable.

It had been a long day—the day had already been long even be tore, and that seemed like consiago. I closed my eves where I was an I tell asleep on the nee

Unenlightened

t was disordening to wake in the absolute dark. In the past months it I'd go ten used to having the sun ter must was morning. At first I thought a must still be night but then feeling the sting of my face and the unhe of my back. I remembered where I was.

Beside me, I could hear the sound of quiet leven breathing it did not trighten me because it was the most familiar or sounds here. I was not surprised that Jamie had crept back and slept beside me last night.

Maybe it was the change in my breathing that woke him maybe it was list that our schedules had become synchronized. But seconds after I was conscious, he gave a little gasp.

"Wanda?" he whispered

"I m right here."

He sighed in relief.

"It's really dark here," he said.

"Yes."

"You think it's breakfest time yet?"

"I don't know."

"I'm bungry. Let's go see."

I didn't answer him.

He in expressed my's ence correctly as the balls it was "You don't have to hide our here. Wanco" he so diearnestly after waiting a moment for me to speak. "I tasked to lared last hight. He's going to stop picking on you. The promised."

I almost smiled. Picking on me

"Will you come with mee" Jamie pressed. His hand found in he

"Is that what you really want me to do." I asked in a low voice

"Yes Everything with he the same as it was before."

Mel- Is this best?

Twist i know. She was torn. She know she couldn't be objective, she wanted to see Jared.

That's craxy, you know

Not as critis as he free hat you reart to see him ho

"Fine famile" I agreed. "But don't get upset when it's not the same as before okay? It things get gly. Well us, don't be surprised."

"It'l, be okay. You'll see,"

I let him lead the way out of the dark towing me by the hand he still held. I braced myself as we entered the big garden cavern, I continue sure of anyone's reaction to me today. Who knew what had been said as I slept?

But the garden was empty though the sun was bright in the morning sky. It reflected off the bundreds of mirrors momen arily blinding me.

James was not interested in the victant cave. His eves were on my face, and he sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth as the light touched my cheek.

"Oh," he gasped. "Are you okay? Does that hart bad?"

I roughed my face lightly. The skip test rough is grit crussed in the along. It tarophed where my fingers brushed.

"It's fine." I whispered the empty cavern made me wary. - I didn't want to speak the lotte. v. Where is everybody?"

Jamie shrugged in a eyes st... right as they surveyed my face. "Busy I guess." He didn't lower his voice.

This reminded me of last night, of the searct he wouldn't tell me. My eyebrows pulled together

What 60 you think be a not telling us

You know tobat I know, Wanda

You're human Area you supposes to have intuition or something?
Intuition? My intuition teels nie that we don't know this place as west
as we thought we did, Melante said.

We pondered the ominous sound of that

It was almost a relief to hear the normal noises of mealtime coming from the kitchen corridor. I didn't particularly want to see anyone — besides the sick yearning to see Jared, of course—but the unpopulated tunne's combined with the knowledge that something was being kept from me, made me edgy.

The kitchen was not even half full—an oddity for this time of the morning. Bu is barely noticed that, becar so the smell coming from the banked stone oven overrused every other thought.

"Oooh," Jamie monted. "Eggs!"

Jamie pulicid me faster now, and I had no rejectance to keep pace with him. We harried stomachs growling, to the counter by the oven where Lucina, the mother stood with a plastic lade in her hand. Breakfast was assay a serve yourself our then breakfast was also usually tough bread rous.

She looked only at the boy as she spoke. "They lasted better an hour ago."

They in taste just fine now " Jamie countered enthus astically "Has everyone eaten?"

"Pretty much I think they took a tray down to Doc and the rest." Locing trained off and her eyes flickered to me for the first time, Jamie's eyes, fid the same. I didn't understand the expression that crossed Licinia's features.—It disappeared the quickly replaced by something case as she appraised the new marks on my face.

"How much is lette" Jam's asked. His eagurness sounded a trifle forced now.

Lucina turned and bent tagging a metal pan off the hot stones in the bottom of the oven with the bow of the laule. "How migh do you want Jamie? There's picinty," site told him without furning

"Pretent I'm Kvie," he said with a laugh

"A Ky e-sized portion it is." Lucina said out a ten she smued, her eyes were unhappy

She filled ane of the soup bows to overflowing with slightly rubbery scrambled eggs stood up, and handed a to famile

She eved me again, and I understook what this look was for

"Let's sir over there, Jamie." I said hudging him away from the counter

He stared in amazement "Don't you want any?"

"No. I m — " I was about to say "fine" again when my stomach gutgled disobediently

"Wandar". He looked at me, then back at Lucina, who had her arms folded across her chest

"I'll just have bread." I muttered try ng to shove him away

"No Lucing, what's the problem?" He looked at her expectantly She didn't move "If you're done here I'll take over" he suggested his eyes narrowing and his mouth setting in a stubborn line.

Lucina shrugged and set the ladie on the stone counter. She walked away slowly, not looking at me again.

"Jamte" I muttered argent v under my breath. "This food isn't meant for me. Jared and he others weren't risking their i ves so that I could have eggs for breakfast. Bread is fine."

"Don't he stuped, Wanda" Jamie said. "You are here now just like the rest of us. Nobody minds it when you wash their clothes or bake their bread. Besides these eggs aren't going to last much longer. If you don't eat them, they II get thrown ou."

I fear all the eyes in the room boring into my back

"That might be preferable to some "I su'd even more quiet." No one but Jamue could possibly hear

"Forget that" famile growled. He hopped over the counter and filled another now with eggs, which he then shoved at me. "You're going to eat every hite." he told me resolutery.

I somed at the bow. My mout a watered. I pushed the eggs a few inches away from me and then to Jed my arms.

Jamic trowned. "Fine" he said and shoved his own bow, across the counter. "You don't eat. I don't eat." His sigmatch grammed and, bly He hided his arms across his chest.

We stated at each other for two long minutes, both our stomachs minuting as well I aled the sme. of the eggs. Every now and then, he would peek down at the tood out of the corner of his eye. That's what beat me in the longing look in his eyes.

"I he "I hatter I sud his how back to him and then retrieved my own. He warted until I took the first bite to for thinks. I stiffed a moan as the taste registered on my longue. I knew the cooked rubbery eggs weren't the best flying I diever tasted, but that's how it for I This body lived for the present.

lam e had a similar reaction. And then he started shove ing the food into his month so tast it seemed held and have time to breathe. It watched him to make sure held and thicke

I are more slowly hoping that I dide able to convince him to easience of mine when he was done

That was when with our minor standott over and my stomach satisfied. I had a noticed the arm isphere in the kitchen.

I would have expected with the excitement of eggs for breakfast after months of monotony more of a feeling of celebration. But the air was somber, the conversarions all whispered. Was this a teaction to the scene last higher I scanned the room trying to understand.

People were looking at me la few here and there but they were, it the only ones to king an serious whispers, and the others paid he no mind at a Besides, not e of them seemed angly or go, it or tense of any of the other emotions I was expecting

No they were and Dospair was exched in every face in his room

Sharon was the ast person I noticed eating in a distant corner keeping to herse that usual. She was so composed as site mechanically a ener breakfast that at firs 1 and it notice the ears or pping in streaks down her ace. They tell into her food but she are as it she were beyond noticing.

"Is some hing a rong with Dock" I whispered to lamie studenty afraid I wondered to I was being puranoid — maybe this had nothing to do with me. The sadness in the room seemed to be part of some other human drama from which I dibeen excluded. Was this what was keeping everyone busy? Had there been an accident?

Jamic looked at Sharon and sighed before he answered me "No. Does fine."

"Aunt Maggie? Is she hurt?"

He shook his nead.

"Where's Walter?" I demanded struct spenng I tea a grawing anxiety as I thought of harm betaling one if my companions here even those who hated me.

"I don't know. He's fine, I'm sure."

I real zed now that Jamie was tist as sad as everyone case here

"What's alrong Janier Why are you upser?"

Jamie looked down at its eggs, earing them slowly and did not answer me.

He finished in silence T in edite pass him what was left in my bow, but heigh wered so hereely that I took it back and all the rest without any more resistance.

We added our howls to the big plastic bin of dirty dishes. It was full so I those it from the counter. I wasn't sure what was going on in the caves, oday, but a shes ought to be a safe occupation.

Jamie came along beside me this eyes afert. I didn't like that I wouldn't allow him to act as my hodyguard of the necessity are se. But then as we made our way around the edge of the oig field my regular bodyguard for not me, so it became a moot point.

In was his by light brown dust covered him from head to toe darket where it was wet with his sweat. The brown streaks smeared across his face did not disglise the exhaus ion there. I was not surprised to see that he was just as down as everyone else but the Just did make me curious. It was not the purple black dust inside the caves. Ian had been outside this morning.

"There you are" he marmared when he saw as Tle was an king switch his ling legs cutting the distance with anxious strictes. When he reached as held dinot slow but rather caught me under the elbow and harried me forward. "Let's cack in here for a minute."

He pulled me and the parrow tunne, mouth that led toward the eastern held, where the corn was almost rape. Held dinot lead me far ast into the darkness where we were invisible from the big room. I fellowing hand rest lightly on my other arm.

After half a minute deep voices echoed through the big cavern. They were not busiterous in they were sumber as depressed as any of the faces. For read this morning. The voices bassed as each in the

crack where we hid, and land hand lensed on my elbox his tangers pressing into the soft spots above the bond if recognized Jared's voice, and Kyac's. My an elstrained against my control and my control was tendous anyway. We both wonted to see Jared's face. It was a good thing Ian held us back.

" don't know why we at him keep trying When its over it's over," Jared was saying

"He really thought he had a trus time. He was so sure. Oh, will le will be worth all this if he figures it out so neday." Kile disagreed.

"If" Jareu's lorted "I guess it's a good thing we found that branch Doc's going to blow through the whole crate by nightfall at the rate he's going."

"He II pass out soon enough." Evid said his voice healthing to fade in the distance. "I wish Sharon would....." And then I couldn't make out any more.

Ian wanted arth the voices taded compile ely ond then a few minutes more before he timely released my arm

"Tared promised." Jamie muttered to him

"Yeah, but Kyle didn't," Ian answered

They walked back out into the light I tollowed slowly behind them, not sure what I was feeling.

lan noticed for the first time what I carried "No dishes now," he told me. "Let's give them a chance to dean up and move on."

I the ght about ask, g but why he was dirty, but probably, a ke Jamie he would refuse to answer. It inned to scare as the tunnel that led toward the rivers, speculating

Ian made an angry sound.

I looked back at him trightened, and then realized what had upso him—he d only just seen my face.

He raised his hand as a lot fit my chin but a fluiched and he dropped it.

"That makes me so sack," he said and his voice tripy did sound as fine were nauscated. "And worse, knowing that I hadn't stayed be and I might have been the one io do it."

I shook my head at him. "It's nothing, Ian."

"I genit agree with that " he mattered and then he spoke to far te

"You probably ought to get to school. It is better that we get everything back to normal as soon as possible."

Jam e groaned "Sharon will be a rightim re toway"

Ian grinned. "Time to lake on, for the real rikid. I don't envy you."

lamic signed and Kacked the dirt. "Keep an eye on Wanda."
"W.L. do."

famile shuffled away cas ing grances back at as every few minutes um. he disappeared into another transe

"Here, give and those " fan said, put ing the bin of dishes from me before I could respond.

"They weren't too heavy for me "I taid him

He granted again "Little is, by standing here with my arms empty white you all githese around. Chalk it up to gallantry. Clipon — let's go resux somewhere out of the way all to the coast is clear."

His words troubled me and I followed him in some Why should gaughtry apply to me?

He wanted at the way to the corr field, and then into the corrfield, stepping in the low part of the furrow between the stairs. I trailed be night out, he stopped somewhere to the middle of the heid, set the dishes aside, and sprawled out on the unit.

"Well this is out of the way." I said as I set led to the ground beside him crossing my legs. "But shouldn't we be working."

"You work too hard, Wanda You're he only one who never takes a day off."

'It gives me something to do "I mumbled

"Everyone is taking a break today, so you might as we..."

I opered at him car or siv. The light from the mirrors threw double shadows three ghithe cornstales that crisscrossed over him like zehra stripes. Under the lines and the lim his paie face was weary

"You look like you've been working "

His eyes tigh ened "But I'm resong now"

"lamie won't e me what's going in," I murmored

"No And neither will I". He sighed "his nothing you want to know anyway."

I stared at the ground, at the dark purple and brown dirt as my

stomach twisted and robed. I could himk of nothing worse than not knowing but maybe I was just lacking in imagination.

"It's not really fair." Ian said after a silent moment, "seeing as I won't answer your question, but do you mind it I ask you one?"

I welcomed the distract on "Co ahead"

the aidnot speak at once so I looked up to find the reason for his heattation. He was starting down now, looking at the dirt streaked across the backs of his bands.

"I know you're not a har I know that now "he said quietly "I Ji beneve you whatever your answer is "

I waited again while he continued to state at the dirt on his skin.

"I dun't buy Jub's story before but he and Doc are pretty convinced. Wandar" he asked looking up at me. "Is she still to there will your The gir, whose body you what?"

This was not just my secret anymore—both Jam e and Jeh knew the truth. Nother was it the secret that really mattered. At any rate, I trusted Jan not to go blabbing to anyone who would kill the over it. "Yes." I told him "Melante siste, here."

He noduce slow v "What is a vike a For your For her?"

"It's true rating, for us to I. A, first I would have given anyhing to have her disappear the way she should have But now I I we gotten used to her." I smiled with a "Sometimes it's nice to have the company. It's harder for her. She's like a prisoner in many ways. Locked away in my head. She prefers that captivity to disappearing, though."

"I didn't know there was a choice "

"There wasn't in the beginning, it was it until your kind discovered what was happening that any resistance started. That seems to be the key—knowing what's going to bappen. The humans who were taken by surprise dion't fight back."

"So if I were eaught?"

I appraised his fierce expression the fire in his brilliant eyes

"I doubt you would disappear. Things have changed, though. When they catch him grown homans now they don't offer them as hosts. Too many problems," I half smalled again. "Problems ake me Grong soft, getting sympathetic to my host, losing my way."

He thought about that it is a long time sometimes looking at my lock sometimes at the cornstalks sometimes at not ling at all

"What would they do or hime then it hey caugh me now?" he finally asked

"They distill a an insertion I hims. Ity up to get information. Probabilities dip it a Secker in you."

He shuddered.

"But hey would be descarage. The word was hard to say The idea sickened me Und in was usually the human it ingo that made me sick. But I dinever looked at the situation from the outh's perspective before no other plane, had forced me to A budy that during the time to the time to be asset as a sar that could not run. What was the point of keeping it are another were conditions of the minution that made a book and sable dangerous mental addictions macrowent yearnings, things that could not on he are and made the book unsafe of others. On it course a mind with a will too strong to be erased. An anomaly localized on this planet.

I had never seen the up thess of treat up an unconquerable spirit as a detect as a carly as I did now looking in o Jan's eves

"And if they esught you?" he asked

"I they real zed who I was a tanvone as a sooking for me." I thought of my Secker and she idered as he had. "They would take me out and put me in another host Someone voing true able. They wor thope that I would be able to be myself again. Maybe they wor diship me if it planet get me as as from the had influences."

"Would you be yourself again?"

I mot his gaze ", am muse fill havent jost myself to Melanic I will feel the same as I do now even as a Bear or a Flower"

"They wouldn't diseard your"

"Not a soul. We have no capital plan shiment for our kind. Or any purishment really. What ever they did it would be to save me. I used to think there was no need tor an other way but now. I have note that proof against that neony. It would propably be right to discard me. I materiator, aren't 12".

lan pursed his lips. "More of an expatriate I disay. You haven't turned on them, you've list let, their society."

We were quiet again I will ou to believe what he said was true. I considered the word expatrace trying to convince myself that I was nothing worse.

Indiex, a eurloud viciough to make me jump. "When Doc sohers up, we get him to take a look at voir face." He reached over and publish hand uncer my chip, this time I diant thinch. He turned my head to the sice so he could examine the wound.

It's not important. I'm sure a looks worse than it is "

"I hope so it is now away." He sighed and then stretched. "I suppose we've it delen long ening that Kyle's did in and unconscious. Want some help with the dishes?"

Into which the me wash to easy estin the scream the way I usually did He insisted that we go that the black hall my moon where I would be invisible. I scrubbed dishes in the shallow end of the dark pool while he cleaned of the first high hid avilys bivs. ery labors. Then he be pedicine with the last of the aims bowls.

When we were done he escented me back to the kitches, which was starting roth up with help netherowal. More peristables were on the ments soft white bread slikes, slabs of sliarp cheddar cheese or cles of ash plock borigna. People were starting down the delications with abandon, hough the despair was still percept his in the slump of their shoulders, in the absence of smiles or laugh or

Jame was waiting for lie at our distanced, or Two dot ble stacks of sandwiches so unificuted him but he wasn't earing. His arms were tolded as he wanted for melifan eyed his expression a mously but left to get his own find a thirt asking.

I rested my eyes at Jamie's stubblish ness and took a bate Jamie dug in as soon as I was chewing I an was back quickly and we all ato in silence. The took tasted so good it was bard to impine a reason for conversation—or any hingle so that whole engity our metable.

I stopped at two, but Jamie and Jamie units into were greating in pain. Ian looked as though he was about to corrapse. His eyes striggled to stay open.

"clet cack to se poor kie." he said to I mie

Jamie appraised h.m. "Maybe I should take over

"Go to school " I told him quickly. I wanted Jame a safe distance from me today.

"La see vou later lokay? Don't worry about about anything."

"Sure " A one word lie wasn't quite so obvious. Or mayor a was just being saccastic again.

Once Jam e was gone I turned on the somnolent Ian "Go get some rest. I II be fine... I'll stay somep ace inconspicuous. Middle of a cornfield or something,"

"Where did you sleep last nighte" he asked his eyes surprisingly sharp under his half-closed ads.

"Wby?"

"I can sleep there now, and you can be inconspicuous beside me."

We were us marmaring, bately over a whisper now. No one paid as any attention

"You can't watch me overy second."

"Wanna bet?"

I shringged giving up "I was back at the — the hole. Where I was kept in the beginning."

Ian frowned he didn't like that But he got up and led the way back to the storage corridor. The main plaza was busy again now time of people moving around the garden all of them grave, their eyes on their feet.

When we were a one in the black tunner. I tried to reason with him again.

"Ian, what's the point of this? Won't it hur! Jamie more, the longer. I'm alive? In the end wouldn't it be better for him if..."

"Don't think like that. Wanda We're not animals. You'r death is not an inevitability."

"I don't think you're an animat " I said quietly

"Thanks. I didn't say that as an accusation though I women't blame you if you did "

That was the end of our conversation, that was the moment we both saw the pale blue light reflecting donly from around the next turn in the tunnel.

"Shh," Ian breathed. "Wait here,"

He pressed my shoulder down gently trying to stick me where I

THE HOST 289

stood. Then he strode forward, making no attempt to hide the sound of his motsteps. He disappeared around the corner

"Jared?" I neard him say, teigoing surprise

My heart test heavy in my chest, the sensation was more pain than fear

"I know it's with your" Jarou ariswered. He raised his voice, so that anyone between here and the main plaza would near. "Come out, come out, wherever you are." he called, his voice hard and mocking.

Betrayed

avbe I should have run the other way. But no one was holding me back now and though his voice was cold and angry. Jared was calling to me. Melanie was even in one eager than I was as I stepped carefully around the corner and into the bale light. I hesitated there

Ian stood just a few feet ahead of me, poised on the balls of his feet ready for whatever host te movement Jared might make foward me

Jared sation the ground on one of the mats famile and I had left here. He looked as weary as Ian, though his eyes, too, were more alort than the rest of his exhausted posture.

"At ease," Tared said to Ian. "It ust want to talk to it. I promised the kild and I I, stand by that promise " $^{\circ}$

"Where's Kyle>" Ian demanded.

"Snoring Your cave might shake apart from the vibrations." Ian didn't move.

"I'm not lying, Ian And I'm not going to kell it Jub is right. No matter how mossed up this stupic satuation is. Jamle has as much say

as I do and he's been totally suckered, so I doubt he's, he giving me the go-ahead anytime soon."

"No one's been suckered " lan growled.

Jared waved his hand dismissing the disagreement over terminology. "It shot in any Janget from me, is my point." For the first time he looked at me levaluating the way I hugged the far wall, watching my hands tremble. "I won't nort you again," he said to me

I took a small step forward.

"You don't have to talk to him if you don't want to, Wanda." Ian said quickly. "This isn't a Juty or a choice to be done. It's not manda tory. You have a choice."

Jared's evebrows pulled low over his eyes. I and words confused him.

No." I will speced "I ll talk to him". I took another short step. Jaren turned his hand palm up and carted his fingers twice, encouraging me forward.

I walked slowly each step an individual movement followed by a pause, not part of a steady advance. I stopped a vard away from him Ian shadowed each step, keep, ig close to my side.

"I dilike to talk to it alone, it you don't mind." Jared said to bim Ian planted himself. "I do mind."

"No Ian it's okay Go get some sleep 11 be hise" I nudged his arm lightly

Ian scrubmized my face, his expression dubious. "This isn't some death wish's Sparing the kide" he demanded

"No lared wouldn't lie to la me about this "

Jaren scowled when I said his name, the so indicate it in, or confidence

"Please Ian." I pleaded "I want to talk to bin."

lan looked at me for a long minute, then turned to scow, at Jared. He barked out each sentence like an order

"Her name is Waraa not it You'w not rough her. Any nark you mave on her. I will double on your worthless bide."

I winced at the threat

Ian turned abruptly and stalked into the darkness

It was silent for a momen, as we both watched the empty space

where he had disappeared. I looked at Jared's face first, while he still stared after lan. When he urned to meet my gaze, I dropped my eyes.

"Wow He's no kikiding, is he?" Jareu said

I treated that as a rhetorical quest on

"Why don't you have a sear?" he asked me patting the mat beside him

I do therated for a moment, then went to sit against the same want but close to the hole putting the length of the mat between us. Me and edidn't like this, she wanted to be near him for me to smell his seent and feel the warmth of his body beside the

I did not want that—and it wasn't because I was atract his would hart me, he didn't look angry at the moment only thred and wary. I did don't want to be any closer to him. Something in my class was horring to have him so near—to have him hat no me in such close proximity.

He watched me his head tilted to the side. I could only meet his gaze fleeting y before I had to look away.

"I'm sorry about last night — about your face. I shouldn't have done that."

I stared at my hands, knotted together in a double fist on my jap. "You don't have to be afraid of me."

I nodded, not looking at him

He granted "Thought you said you would talk to me."

I shrugged. I couldn't find my voice with the weight of his antagonism in the air between us.

I heard him move. He scooted down the mat until he sat right beside me—the way Melante had hoped for Too close — it was hard to
think straight, hard to breathe right—but I couldn't bring myself to
scoot away. Ou tly, for this was what she'd wanted in the first place.
Melante was suddenly trutated.

A har? I asked startled by the intensity of her ein, tion

I don't like him next to you It doesn't feet right I don like the way you want him there. For the first time since we'd abandoned civilization regular I felt waves of hostility emanating from ter I was shocked. That was hardly fair.

"I as have one question " fared said interrupting as

I met his gaze and then shied away — recording both from his hard eyes and from Melanie's resentment

"You can probably guess what it is Jeb and Jamie spent all night jabbering at me. , "

I wanted for the question starting across the dark halt at the rice bag. Tast nights follow In my peripheral vts on I saw his hand come up, and I cringed into the wall.

"I'm not going to hurt you" he said again impatient, and cupped my chin in his rough hand pulling my face around so I had to look at him.

My heart scattered when he touched me, and there was suddenly too much moisture in my eyes. I blinked trying to clear them

"Wanda" He said my name slowly unwilling videound tell though his voice was even and toneless. "Is Me anie still alive still part of you? Tell me the truth."

Meanie at acked with the brute strength of a wrecking ba. It was physically painful, like the sudden stab of a migraine headache, where she tried to force her way out.

Stop st! Can't you see?

It was so obvious in the set of his lips, the tight lines under his eyes. It is on timatter what I said or what she said.

I'm alrea is a sar to 6.m I told her the doesn't wan, the truth—he's just sowing for evidence some way to prove me a sar a Seeker to Jeh and Jamie so that he il he assowed to kis, me

Melanie refused to answer or believe met it was a struggie to keep her silent

Jared watched the sweat bead on my torehead, the strange shiver that shook down my spine, and his eyes narrowed. He held on to my chin recusing to let me hide my tace.

tared. Hope you she tried o scream I'm right here

My ...ps didn't quiver, but I was surprised that he couldn't read the wards spelled out plainly in my eves

Time passed slowly while he waited for my answer. It was agonizing, having to stare into his even having to see the revulsion there. As I that weren't enough. Melanie's anger continued to since at me from the inside. Her jeasously swelled into a bitter flood that washed through my body and left it polluted.

More time passed, and the tears welled up anti-they couldn't be contained in my eyes anymore. They spaced over onto my cheeks and rolled shearly into faced's palm. This expression didn't change

Final vill disau anough I closed my eyes and rerked my head sown. Rather than burt me, he dropped his hand.

He sighed, frustrated,

I expected he would cave I stared at my hands again, waring for that. My heartheat marked the passing minutes. He didn't move I didn't move. He seemed carved he tot stone beside me. It fit him this stone ike stillness. It fit his new hard expression, the flint in his eyes.

Meianic pondered this Jared, comparing him with the manine used in be. She remembered an unremarkable day on the run.

"Aigh" lared and lamie groan logether

Lared lounges on the leather sofa and Jamie sprawls on the carpel in front of him. They're warrhing a pasketbal game on the big-screen Tv. The palasites who live in this house are at work, and we've already hiled the leep with all it can hold. We have hours in rest before we need to disappear again.

On the Ty two players are disagreeing pointery on the sideline. The cameraman is close we can hear what they're saying

"I believe I was the last one to fough it. It is your ball."

" minot sure about that it wouldn't want to take any intal advantage. We'd better have the rets review the tape."

The players shake hands, pat each other's shoulders

"This is ridiculous," Jared grumbles.

"can't's and it" partie agrees, mirroring pared's tone perfectly the sounds more like Jared every day—one of the many forms his hero worship has taken. "Is there anything else on?"

pared flips through a few channels until he finds a track and field meet. The parasites are holding the Olympics in Halti right now. From what we can see the aliens are all hugely excited about it pots of them have Olympic flags outside their houses in sinot the same though Everyone who participates gets a medal now. Pathetic.

But hely can't really screw up the hundred meter dash individual parasite sports are much more entertaining than when they try to compete against each other directly. They perform better in separalle lanes.

"Mel, come retax," Jared calls.

I stand by the back door out of habit, not because tim tensed to run. Not because im frightened Empty habit, nothing more

go in lared. He pulls me onto his up and tucks my head under his thin.
"Comfortable?" he asks.

"Yes." Say because learly muly am entirely committable Here in an alien's house.

Dad used to say lots of funny things—like he was speaking his own language sometimes. Twenty-three skidoo salad days, nosy parker, bandbox tresh, the calbird sear ichocolate teapor, and something about Grandma sucking eggs. One of his favorites was safe as houses.

Teaching melluride a bike my mather worrying in the doorway "Caim down Linda, this street is sale as houses." Convincing lamie to sleep without his night ight. "It is sale as houses in here, son, not a monster for mites."

Then overnigh the world turned into a liueous nightmare and the phrase became a black joke to Jamie and the Houses were the most dangerous places we knew.

Hidir gin a patch of scrubby pines, watching a car pull out from the garage of a sectuded home ideciding whether to make a food run, whether it was too dicey. "Do you think the parasites" be gone for long?" "No way—that place is safe as houses—Let's get but of here."

And now can sit here and warch TV like this five years ago and Mom and Dad are in the other room and tive never spent a night hiding in a drainpipe with Jamie and a bunch of rais while body snatchers with spotlights search for the thieves who made off with a bag or direct beans and a bowl of cold spaghett.

I know that it come and iscrived alone of twenty years we would never find this feeling on our own. The feeling of safety. More than safety, even happiness. Safe and happy two things it hought "dinever feel again.

lared makes is feel that way withou lifying, list by being lared

breathe in the scent of his skin and feel the warmth of his body under mine

ared makes every hing safe, everything happy. Even houses

He still makes me feet sale. Melanic realized, teeting the warmth where his aem was just half an inch from mine. Though he mess leven know I'm here.

I didn't fee safe. Loying Jarett made me teel less safe than anything ease I could think of

I wondered it Melanie and I would have toved Jared in he dislikelys been who he was now rather than the smiring lated in our memories, the one who had come to Melanie with his hands full of hope and miracles. Would she have followed him if he dia ways been so hard and cynical? If the loss of his laughing father and wild big brothers had seed him over the way nothing but Meian estims had?

Of course. Mel was certa v. I would over Javed in any locus. Even I ke this, he belongs with me

I wondered if the same held true for me. Would I love him now if he were like this in her memory?

Then I was intercupted. Without any cue that I perceived suddeniv Jared was talking, speaking as if we were in the middle of a conversation.

"And so, because of you Jeh and Jamie are convinced that it's possible to continue some kind of awareness after—being caught."

They're both sure Me's still kicking in there."

He rapped his fist lightly against my head. I flinched away from him, and he folded his arms.

"Jam'e thinks she's talking to him." He rouled his eves. "Not really fair to play the kid like that — but that's assuming a sense of ethics that clearly does not apply."

I wrapped my arms around myself.

"Jeb does have a point though—that's what's killing me! What are you after." The Scekers search wasn't will directed or even suspicious. They only seemed to be looking for you—not for us. So may be they didn't know what you were up to. May be you're freelanding. Some kind of undercover thing. Or

It was easier to ignore him when he was speculating so foodsoly. I focused on my knees. They were dirty as usual purple and hisek

"Maybe they so right about the killing you part anyway."

Enexpectedly his tingers brushed lightly once across the goose bumps his words had raised on my arm. His voice was softer when he spoke again. "Nobody's going to hur you now. As long as you aren't causing any trouble......" He shrugged. "I can sort of see their point...

and maybe in a sick way it would be wrong, like they say. Maybe there is no justifiable reason to — Except that Jamie —"

My a ead if piped up — has eyes were sharp, scruting ing my reaction. I regre ted showing interest and watched my knees again.

"It scares me how attached he's getting," Jared muttered. "Shouldn't have left him behind. I never imagined. And I don't know what to do about it now. He thinks Mel's alive in there. What will it do to him when . . . ?"

I noticed how he said when not / No matter what promises he didn't see me lasting in the long term.

"I'm surprised you got to Jeb." he reflected changing the subject. "He's a canny old guy. He sees through deceptions so eas: y "Till now."

He thought about that for a minute-

"Not much for conversation, are you?"

There was another long stence.

His words came in a sudden gush. "The part that keeps bugging me is what if they're right? How the hell would I know? I hate the way their logic makes sense to me. There's got to be another explaination."

Melanie struggled again to speak, not as viciously as before, this time without hope of breaking through I kep, my arms and apslocked

Jared moved shifting away from the wall so that his body was turned toward me. I watched the movement from the corner of my eye.

"Why are you here?" he whispered.

I pecked up at his face. It was gentle, kind, almost the way Melante remembered it. I felt my control slipping, my this proceded. Keeping my arms locked took all my strength. I wanted to touch his face. I wanted it. Melante did not like this

If you won't set me muse, then at reast keep your bands to yoursely, she hissed.

I'm trying I'm sorry. I was sorry. This was hi rting her. We were both hurring, different horts. It was hard to know who had it worse at the moment.

fared watched me curiously while my eyes fixed again.

"Why?" he asked softly. "You know leb has this crazy idea that you're here for me and famile Isn't that nuts?"

My mouth hair opened. I quickly bit down on my lip.

lated leaned forward slowly and those my face between both his hands. My eyes closed.

"Won't you tell me?"

Wy head shook once tast I wasn't sure who did it. Was it me saying won't of Melanie saying can't?

As hands tightened under my jaw. I opened my eves and his face was inches away from mine. My heart fluttered, my siomach dropped. I thed to orea helioutiny lungs did not obey

I recognized the intention in his eyes. I knew how he would move exactly how his lips would feel. And yet it was so new to me ig hist more shocking than any other as his mouth pressed against mine.

I think he meant just to touch his lips to more to be soft but things changed when our skin met. His mouth was abruptly hard and rough his hands trapped my face to his while his lips moved mine to argent, unlamiliar patterns. It was so different from remembering, so much stronger My head swam incoherently.

The body revoked I was no longer in control of t — it was not on trol of me. It was not Milianic — the body was stronger than either of us now. Our breathing echoed loudly in ne will and gasping. It is fierce, almost a snart.

My arms broke free from my control. My left hand reached for his face, his hair to wind my fingers in a

My right har I was taster. Was not mine

Melanie's bit purched his aw, knocked his face away from mine with a bit no low sound. Fresh against flesh hard and angry

The force of it was not enough to move him far but he scrambled away from me the instant our lips were no longer connected, gap ngwith horrorstruck expression.

I stated down at the start conched fist, as repulsed as if z d found a scorp on growing on the end of my arm. A gasp of revulsion choked its way out of my throat 1_{E} rabbed the right whist with my left hand despirate to keep. Mean z from asing my body for violence again.

I glanced up at fared. He was staming at the fist I restrained too, the horror fading, surprise taking its place. In that second has expression was entirely defenseless. I could easily read his thoughts as they moved across his unlocked face.

This was not what he had expected. And he d had expectations that was plain to see. This had been a test. A test he d thought he was prepared to evaluate. A test with results he d anticipated with confidence. But he'd been surprised.

Did that mean pass or fail?

The pain in my chest was not a surprise. I a ready knew that a breaking heart was more than an exaggeration.

In a fight or flight situation. I never had a choice at would always be flight for me. Because Jared was between me and the darkness of the tunne lexit. I wheeled and threw myself into the box-packed hole.

The boxes trunched, crackled and cracked as no weight shoved them not the wall into the floor I wriggled my way not the impossible space to sting around the heavier squares and crushing the others. I telt his fingers scrape across my toot as he made a grab for my ankle and I kicked one of the more solid boxes between as. He granted, and despair wrapped choking hands around my throat I badn't meant to hart him again. I hadn't meant to strike I was only trying to escape.

I didn't hear my dain sobbing, loud as it was until found guino farther into the crowded hose and the sound of my thrashing stopped. When I did hear myself, heard the ragged, tearing gasps of agony, I was mortified.

So mortilled, so humiliated I was hornited a myself at the violence I d allowed to flow through my body whether consciously or not but that was not why I was soliting. I was soliting because it had been a test, and, stupid stupid stupid, emotional creature that I was. I wanted It to be real

Melanie was writhing in agony inside me, and it was hard in make sense of the double pain. I tell as though I was dying because it was no real she to I as though she was dying because, to her it had telt real enough. In all that she duest since the end of her world, so long

300 STEPHEN E MEYER

ago, she dinever before felt betrayed. When her father had brought the Seekers after his children, she diknown it was not bim. There was no betrayar only grief. Her father was dead. But fared was alive and himself.

No one's netrayed yeu, stupid, I railed at her I wanted her pain to stop. It was too much, the extra burden of her agony. Mine was enough.

How could be r How? she rented, ignoring me.

We sobbed, beyond control.

One word snapped us back from the edge of bystema.

From the mouth of the hale, Jared's low rough voice — broken and strangely child he - asked "Mel"

Abbreviated

ele" he asked again, the hope he diant want to fee, coloring.

My breath caught in another sob, an aftershock

"You know that was for you Me. You know that Not for the at You know I wasn't kissing it."

My next son was louder a moan. Why couldn't I shut up? I tried holding my breath.

"If you're in there Me. " He paused

Meianie hated the "if" A sob burst up through my lings and I gasped for air

"I love you." Jaren said: "Even if you're not there, it you can't hear me, I love you."

I held my breath again in ting my plants at bled. The physical pain didn't distract me as much as I wished it would

It was show outside the hole and then silent inside, too as I turned blie. It is stened intently concentrating only on what I could hear. I wouldn't think. There was no sound.

I was twisted in 6 the most impossible position. My beau was the lowest point, the right side of my face pressed against the rough rock floor. My shot ideas were stanted around a crumpled box edge, the right higher than the left. My hips angled the apposite way with my left cast pressed to the ceiling. I know I would have to find some way in explain to Ian and Iamle that I had fone this to myself but how? What should I say? How co. I I to I them that lared had kissed me as a test like giving a lab ratio loft of electricity to observe its reaction?

And how long was I supposed to hide this position * I didn't want to make any noise, but it felt like my spine was going to snap in a minute. The pain got more without to bear every second. I wouldn't be able to hear it in scence for long. A ready a whimper was noing in my throat.

Melante had nothing to say to me. She was quietty working through her own react and fury. Jared had spoken to her finally recognized her existence. He had told her he loved her. But he had it seed me. She was trying to convince herself that there was no reason to be wounced by this, trying to believe all the solid reasons why this wasn't what it feitlike. Trying but not yet succeeding a lost different of this but it was directed in ernally. She wasn't speaking to me. In the livenile, polity sense of the phrase. I was getting the cost shoulder.

I feat an infamiliar anger toward her. Not like the beginning when I feated her and wished for her eradication from my mind. No, I feat my own sense of betrayal new. How could she be anary with me for what had happened? How did that make sense? How was it my fault that I differ in love because of the memories she facted on me and then been overthrown by this limit y body? I cared that she was suffering verify pain meant nothing to her. She emoved it Victous humans

Tears, much weaker than the others, flowed down my checks in science. Her hostitus toward me sammered in my mind.

Abruptly the pain in my bruised, wisten back was too much. The straw on the camel

"Ung." I gri nted positing against stone and condocard as I shoved myself backward.

I didn't care about the noise anymore, I just wanted out I swore to myself that I would never cross the threshold of this wretened pit again — death first. Literary.

It was harder to worm out than it had been to dive in. I wiggled and squirmed around until I felt like I was making things worse, bending myself into the shape of a opsided prefixe. I started to cryagain, the actual afraid that I would never get free

Melanie sighed. Hook your foot around the edge of the mouth and pull yourself out, she suggested.

I ignored her struggling to work my torso around a particle a lypointy corner. It abbed me just under the ribs.

Don't be petty, she grumoled.

That's rich, coming from you

I know She has tated, then caved Okav sorry I am Look, In the man It's hard to be fair sumetimes. We don't always feet the right thing do me right thing. The resentment was still there but she was trying to forgive and torget that I down made out with her true love—that's the way she thought of it, at least

I hooked my foot around the edge and yanked. My unce hit the floor and I used that everage to , ft my ribs off the point. It was easier then to get my other foot out and vank again. Finally my hands tound the floor and I shoved my way through a breech birth failing onto the dark green mat. I say there for a moment, facedown breathing. I was sure at this point that Jared was long gone, but I didn't make certain of that right away. I just breathed in and out until I felt prepared to lift my head.

I was alone I tried to hold on to the rehef and torget the sorrow this fact engendered. It was better to be alone. Less humiliating

I curled up an the matipressing my face against the musty fabric. I wasn't sleepy, but I was tired. The crushing weight of Jired's rejection was so heavy it exhausted me. I closed my eyes and fried to think about things that wouldn't make my stinging eyes tear again. Any thing but the appared look on Jared's face, when he dibroken away from me.

What was lamie using now? Did he know I was here, or was he looking for me? Ian would be asleep for a long time like dilooked so exhausted. Would Kyle wake soon? Would he come in search? Whate

was leby I hadn't seen him all day. Was Doc really drinking himself anconscious? That seemed so all like him.

I woke slowly roused by my grow and stomach. I lay quiet vifor a few minutes trying o orient myself. Was it day or night? How and had I siept here alone?

My stomach wouldn't be ignored for long, though and I rolled up onto my knees. I must have supt for a while to be this lungry missed a mea, or two.

I considered eating something from the supply pile in the hole after all I diagreedy lamaged pretty much everything maybe destroyed some But that only made melfeel graftier about the idea of taking more. I'd go scavenge some rolls from the kitchen.

I was teeing a lattle hart on up intial, the big hure that I dibech down here so long without anyone coming to look for the limits at variable with should absone care what happened in merities I was relieved and appeared to find Jamie setting in the doorway to the big garden his back turned on the human world behind him, units takably waiting for me.

My eves or gluened, and so did his. He scrainbled to his teet, report washing over his features.

"You're okay," he said. I was reache were right. He began to rambie "I mean. I d'un't think Jured was living to it he said he thought you wanted to be alone, and Joh said. I couldn't go check on you and that I had to stay right here where he could see that I wasn't sneaking back there, but even though I didn't then? you were host or anything, it was hard to not know for sure, you know?"

"Im time" I told him. Buil held invitarms our seeking comfort. He threw his arms around my waish, and I was shocked to find that his head could rest on my shoulder while we stood.

"Your eyes are red" he whispered "Was he mean to you?"

"No." After all people werent intentionally cruel to lab gats they were just arying to get information.

"Whatever you said to him. I thank he believes us now. About Mel I mean. How does she feel?"

"She's glad about that."

He notified pleased "How about your"

I hesitated looking for a factual response "To ling the true is easier for me than trying to hide it."

My evasion seemed to answer the question enough to satisfy him

Behind him, the light in the garden was red and fading. The sunhad already set on the desert.

"I'm hangey," I told him and I p med away from our hug-

"I knew you would be I saved you something good."

I sighed "Bread's fine"

"Let it go, Wanda Jan says you're too self sacrabeing for your own good."

I made a face

"I think he's got a point" Jamie muttered. "Even if we all want you here, you don't be ong until you decide you do."

"I call t ever belong. And nobody really wants me here, lanue."
"I do."

I didn't fight with him but he was wrong. Not lying, necause he believed what he was saying. But what he really wanted was Melanie. He didn't separate us the way he should

Trudy and He di were baking to is in the katchen and sharing a bright green, may apple. They took turns taking bites.

"It's good to see you. Wanda." Trudy said sincerely covering her mouth white she spoke because she was still chewing her last bite. Heid, nodded in greeting, her teeth sunk in the apple. Jamie nudged me, trying to be inconspicuous about it is pointing or tithat people wanted me. He wasn't making allowances for common courtesy.

"Did you save her Jinner?" he asked eagerly

"Yep," Truck said. She bent down beside the oven and came back with a metal tray in her hand. "Kept it warm, it is probably nasty and tough now but it is netter than the usual."

On the tray was a rather large piece of red meat. My mouth started to water leven as I rejected the portion I dibeen abouted.

"It's too much."

"We have to eat all the per shables the first day." James encouraged me. "Everyone cats themse was saik. It's a tradition."

"You need the protein. Trudy added. "We were on cave rations too ong I'm surprised no one's to worse shape."

I are my protein while ja me watched with hawk-like aften ion as each bite traveled from the tray to my mouth. I are it all to please him, though a made my stomach ache to eat so much

The kitchen started to fill up again as I was timen ng. A few had apples in their hands — all sharing with someone else. Cur ous eyes examined the sore side of my face.

"Why's everyone coming here now?" I muttered to Jamie. It was back outside, the dinner hour long over

Jamie looked at the plankty for a second. "To hear you teach " His tone added the words of course

"Are you kidding me?"

"I told you nothing's changed."

I stated around the narrow room. It wasn't a fact house. No Doctonight, and none of the returned raiders, which meant no Paigo either No Job, no Ian no Walter A few others missing. Itaxis. Cat a Ruth Ann. But more than I would have thought, it I dithought any one would consider following the normal routine after such an abnormal day.

"Can we go back to the Dolphins where we lett off?" Wes asked interrupting my evaluation of the room. I could see that he ditaken it upon himself to start the ball relying rather than that he was vitally interested in the kinship circles of an alien planet.

Everyone looked at the expectantly. Apparently, if e was not changing as much as I'd thought

I took a tray of rous from Heid is hands and turned to shove it into the stone oven. I started talking with my back at a turned

"So um himm the untithered set of grandparents. They traditionally serve the community, as they seg it. On Earth, they would be the breadwinners, the ones who leave the home and bring back sustenance. They are farmers, for the most part. They caltivate a plant ake growth that they milk for its sap..."

And life went on.

James tried to talk me out of sleeping in the supply corridor but his attempt was halfbearted. There just wasn't another place for me. Stubborn as is a he insisted on sharing my quarters. I magined Jared don't ke that but as I didn't see him diat night or the next day. I couldn't verify my theory.

I was awkware again going about my usual chores, with the six ralities home. This like when let has first forces me to join the commin to Hostne states, angry sitences. It was harder for them than it was being though. I was used to. They on the other hand were entirely inaccustomed to the way everyone else treated the When I was he ping with the earn harvest for example and Lily thanked me for a fresh basket with a sin at Anciv's eves burged in their sockets at the exchange. Or when I was withing for the bathing pion with Trudy and He de and Heid negan playing with my hair. It was growing, always swing ou in my eyes, hese days, and I was planning to shear it off again. Head was trying to find a sixle for meliflipping the strands this way and that Brandt and Aaron - Aaron was the notes man who di gone on the lengitard semeone I couldn't remember baving seen betore at a life came our and found us there. Truck laughing at some s y atrocats. Here was at emplaned create at 15 my head, and both men't irned a little green and stalked silently past us.

Of a rise of a trings like that were northing. We eronmed the cases now and bough he was aby ously under orders to eave me in peace his expression made a cicar that his resurction was repugnant to him. I was a ways with others when I crossed his path, and I won derect it has was the only reason held a northing more than glower as me and unconsciously outling thick fingers into claws. This brought back a little pante from my first weeks here and I might have succembed to it liberg in hiding against aveiding the common areas but something more important if an Kile's manuerous glares came to my attention that second night.

The kitchen bit a uplagon. Immot sure how much was interest in my series and how much was interest in the chocolare bars leb his led out. I declined in no explicitly one diagram od lamie that I could not talk all chew at the same time. I suspected that he would save one for the other nate as ever Ian was back in his usual hot seat by the fire and Anex was here—ever wary—beside Palac. None of the other faiclers—including larea, of course was in attenuance. Doc was not here and I woncered it he was signal in k or perhaps hung over And again, Walter was absent.

Orectires. It was I shall questioned me for the first rime to might I was pleased though I tried but o show it that he seemed to

have joined the ranks of the humans who tolerated me. But I couldn't answer his questions were like Doc's.

"I don't really know anything about Healing," I admitted "I never went to a Healer after — after I first got here. I haven't been sick. All I know is that we wouldn't choose a planet unless we were able to maintain the host bodies perfectly. There's nothing that can't be healed, from a simple cut, a broken bone, to a disease. Old age is the only cause of death now. Even healthy human bodies were only designed to last for so long. And there are not dents, too. I gliess though those don't happen as often with the souts. We're cautious."

"Armed humans aren't just an accident," someone muttered I was moving bot rous, I didn't see who spoke and I didn't recognize the voice.

"Yes, that's true," I agreed evenly

"So you don't know what they use to cure diseases, then?" Geoffrey pressed "What's in their medications?"

I shook my head. 'I'm sorry I don't It wasn't something I was in terested to back when I had access to the information. I'm afraid I took it for granted. Good health is simply a given on every planet I velived on."

Geoffrey's red cheeks flushed brighter than usua. He looked down an angry set to his mouth. What had I said to offend him?

Heath, sitting beside Gentiery patted his arm. There was a pregnant science in the room.

It wasn't something I had explained, but I was prefly sure he wasn't really that interested — this was last the first question he'd been able to think of

My informal class ended earlier than usual. The questions were slow, and most of them supplied by Jamie and Ian. Geoffrey's questions had left everyone case preoccupied.

"Well we ve got an early one tomorrow teating down the stalks."

Jeb mused after yet another awkward stience, making the words a dis-

missa. People cose to their teet and stretched to king in low voices that weren't casual enough

"What did I say?" I whispered to Ian

"Nothing. They we got mortality on their minds." He sighed

My human brain made one of those leaps in understanding that they called intuition.

"Where's Walter-" I demanded still whispering

Lan signed again. "He's in the south wing, He's not doing well."

"Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Things have been difficult for you ately, so "

I shook my head inpatiently at that consideration. "What's wrong with him?"

Jamie was there beside me now the took my hand

"Some of Walter's bones snapped, they're so brittle" he said in a hushed voice. "Due's sure it's cancer. hus, stages, he says."

"Walt must have been keeping quiet about the pain for a long while now." Ian added somberly

I winced "And there's nothing to be done? Nothing at ail?"

Lan shook his head, keeping his or Lant eyes on mine. "Not for us. Even if we weren't stuck here, there would be no help for him now. We never cured that one."

I bit my up against the suggestion I wanted to make. Of course there was nothing to do for Walter. Any of these humans would rather die slowly and in pain than trade their mind for their body's cute. I could understand that it now.

"He's been asking for you." Inn continued. "Well he says your name sometimes at a hard to to a what he means — Doc's keeping ham drunk to help with the pain."

"Doc texas real bad about using so much of the alcohol hunself." lame added "Bad timing, an around."

"Can I see him?" I asked "Or will that make the others unhappy?"

Ian trowned and snorted. "Wouldn't that he just like some people to get worked up over a us?" He shook his head. "Who cares, though right? If it's Walt's fina. wish"

"Right" I agreed. The word had my eves burning. "If seeing

me is what Walter warns, then I guess it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks, or if they get mad."

"Don't worry about that I'm not going to let anybody harass." you." Ian's white his pressed no a bin line

I fert anxious, like I wanted to look at a clock. Time had ceased to mean much to me but saudenly likely the weight of a deadline. "Is to too late to go tonight? Will we disturb him?"

"He's not sleeping regular hours. We can go see "

I started walking at once, dragging Jamie because he still gripped my hand. The sense of passing rime of endings and hing its propelled. me torward. Ian eaught up quickly, though, with his long stride

In the moonlit garden cavern, we passed others who for the most part paid us no mine. I was too of en in the company of Jamie and Ian to cause any curiosity though we weren't headed for the usual tunnels.

The one exception was Kyle. He troze midstride when he saw his brother beside me. His eyes flashed down to see Jamie's hand in mine. and then his lips twisted into a snar.

Ian squared his shot liders as he at surbed his brother's reaction his mouth corlect into a mirror of Ryles and he Jehberately reached for my other hand. Kyle made a noise like he was about to be sick and turned has back on us.

When we were in the blackness of the long tunnel south I tried to free that hand, lan gropped it tighter

"I wish you wouldn't make him angrier." I muttered

"Kyle is wrong. Being wrong is sort of a habit with him. He II take longer than anyone else to get over it but that doesn't mean we should make allowances for him."

"He frightens me " I admitted in a whisper. "I don't want him to have more reasons to hate me."

Ian and Jamie squeezed my hands at the same time. They spoke simultaneously

"Don't be afraid," Jamie said

"Jeb's made his opinion very clear," Ian said

"What do you mean?" I asked Ian.

"If Kyle can t accept lobis in less then he sino longer we come here."

"But that's wrong. Kyle be ongs here."

In grunted "He's staying so he'll as have to learn to deal."

We didn't to k again through the long walk. I was feeling guitty

it seemed to be a permanent emotional state here. Guilt and fear and heartbreak. Why had I come?

Because you do belong here loadly enough Melanie whispered. She was very aware of the warmth of Lans and Jamie's hands, wrapped around and twined with mine. Where else have you ever had this?

Natibere I contessed teeing only more depressed. But it doesn't make me belong. Not the way you do

We're a package deal, Wanda

As if I needed reminding. .

I was a little surprised to hear her so clearly. She'd been quiet the last two days, wa ting, anxious, hoping to see Jared again. Of course, I'd been similarly occupied.

Maybe be's with Walter Maybe that's where he's been. Me ame thought hopefully

That's not why were going it see Walter

No. Of course not. Her tone was repentant, but I realized that Waster did not mean as much to her as he did to me. Naturally, she was sad that he was dying, but she had accepted that outcome from the beginning. I on the other hand could not bring myself to accept it, even now. Waster was my friend, not hers. I was the one held defended.

One of those dim blue lights greeted us as we approached the hospital wing. I knew now that the lanterns were solar powered, left in summy corners during the day to charge? We all moved more quietly slowing at the same time without having to discuss it.

I hated this room. In the darkness, with the oud shadows thrown by the weak glow it seemed only more forbuilding. There was a new smell — the room recked of slow decay and stinging alcohol and bile.

Two of the cots were occupied. Does feet hang over the edge of one; I recognized his light snore. On the other tooking hideously withered and misshapen. Watter watched as approach

"Are you up for visi ors, Walt?" Ian whispered when Walter's eyes drifted in his direction.

"Ungh" Walter moaned. His lips drooped from his slack face, and his skin gleamed welly in the low light

3 2 STEPHEN & MEYER

"Is there anything you need," I murmured I pulled my hands free they fluttered helplessly in the air netween me and Walter

His roosely roung eyes searched the darkness. I took a step closer

"Is there anything we can do for your Anything at alle"

His eyes roamed till they for nd my face. Abruptly, they focused through the dranken stapor and the pain.

"Finally," he gasped. His breath wheezed and whistled. "I knew you would come if I walted long enough. Oh, Gladys, I have so much to tell you."

Needed

troze and then looked quickly over my shoulder to see it someone was behind me

"Chacks was his wife." Jamie whispered almost silently. "She vidnit escape."

"Gladys," Waster sate to me obtraines to my reaction. "Would you believe I went and got cancer? What are the odds on? Never rook a sick day in my life..." His voice faded out onto I couldn't hear it, but his lips continued to move. He was too weak to life his hand, his fingers dragged themselves toward the edge of the cot, toward me

Jan nudged me forward

"What should I doe" I breathed. The sweat beading on my forehead had nothing to do with the humid heat.

" grandfather lived to be a hundred and one." We ter wheezed, audible again. "Nobody ever had caliver in my family not even the cousins. Didn't your aunt Regan have skin cancer though?"

He looked at me trusting y waiting for an answer Tan poken me in the back.

"Um ..." I mumbled.

"Maybe that was B1's aunt." Waster allowed.

I shot a panicked glance at lan who shrugged. "Help " I mouthed at him

He motioned for me to take Walter's searching fungers.

Water's skin was chark white and translacent. I could see the faint pulse of blood in the blue veins on the back of his hand. I lifted his hand gangerly, worried about the slender bones that Jamie had said were so brittle. It for tho light as if it were hollow.

"Ah Gladdie it's been hard without you It's a rice place here you! like it, even when I'm gone Flenty of people to talk to it know how you need to have your conversation." The volume of it's voice sank until I couldn't make out the words anymore, but his ans still shaped the words he wanted to share with his wife. His mouth kept moving even when his eyes closed and his head folled to the side.

Ian found a wet cluth and began wiping Waster's sharing face

"I'm not good at — at deception "I wo spered watching Walter's mumbing lips to make sure he wasn't listening to me. "I don't want to apset him."

"You don't have to say anything." Ian reassured me. "He's not jucicienough to care."

"Do I look like her?"

"Not a bit - I've seen her picture. Slocky reubcad."

"Here, let me do that."

lan gave me the rag and I cleaned the sweat off Waller's neck. Busy hands always made me fee more comfortable. Walter continued to mamble I thought a heard him say. "Thanks Gladdle that's nice."

I didn't notice that Doo's shores had stopped. His familiar voice was suddenly there behind the two gent e to startle.

"How is he?"

"Do is one "Ian whispered "Is that the brandy or the pain."

More the pain, I would think I ditrade my right arm for some morphine."

"Maybe Jared will produce another in racio" Ian suggested "Maybe," Doc sighed.

I wiped absent viat. Waiter's pailed face. Estening more intently now but they didn't speak of fared again.

Nat bere, Melanie whispered.

Looking for help for Walter, I agreed

Atone, she added.

I though about the last time I diseen a.m.—the kiss, the belief. He probably towarded some time to hunsely

I hope be into out their come mong himse I shot you're a very talented actress-slash-Seeker again.

That's possible, of course

Melante grouned stlently

can and Doc marmared in quiet voices about inconsequential things mostly lan carching Doc up on what was going on in the caves.

"What happened to Wanda's facer" Doc whispered, but I could still hear him easily

"More of the same " Ian said in a right voice

Doc made an unhappy noise ancer his breath and then clicked to stongue

Ian fold him a bit about tonight's awkward class, about Geottrey's questions

"It would have been convenient if Meianie had been possessed by a Healer," Doc mused

I flinched, but they were benind me and probably dian't notice

"We're locky it was Wanda." Ian murmared in my defense "No one else —"

"I know." Doc interripted good nati red as a ways. "I guess I should say, it is too bad Wanda dian't have more of an interest in medicine."

I'm sorry " I marmated. I teas careless to reap the benefits of perfect health without ever being curious about the cause

A band touched my shoulder "You have nothing to apologize for" fan said.

lamie was being very quiet. I looked around and saw that he was carried up on the cot where Doc had been happing.

"It's late." Doc noted. "Watter's not going anywhere ton ght. You should get some sleep."

"We II be back " Ian promised. "Let us know what we can bring for either of you."

I aid Waiter's hand down patting it cautiously. His eyes snapped open, focusing with more awareness than before

"Are you leaving?" he wheezed "Do you have to go so soon?"

I took his hand again quick v. "No. I don't have to leave."

He smiled and closed it is eyes again. His fingers locked around mine with brittle strength.

Ian sighed.

"You can go? I told him "I don't mind. Take Jamie back to his bed."

lan glanced around the room "Hold on a sec," he said, and then he grabbed the cot closest to him. It wasn't heavy the lifted it easily and said it into place next to Walter's I stretched my arm to the lan't trying not to jostle Walter so that Ian could arrange the cot under it. Then he grabbed me up just as easily and set me on the cot beside Walter Walter's eves never fluttered. I gasped quietly, caught off guard by the casual way can was able to put his hands on me tas though I were burnan.

Ian jerked his chan toward Walter's bond clasped around mine "Do you think you can sleep like that?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can "

"Steep wen, then" He smaled at me, then turned and tifted Jam e from the other cot. "Let's go, kid," he muttered carrying the boy with no more effort than if he were an intant. Iam's quiet tootsteps faded into the distance until I couldn't hear them, invinore.

Dot yawned and went to sit behind the desk he a constructed out of wooden crates and an aluminum door taking the dam lamp with him. Walter's face was too dark to see, and that made me nervous. It was like he was already gone. I took comfort in his hingers, still curied stiffly around mine.

Doc began to shuffle through some papers. It imming almost indud biv to it insect. I drifted off to the sound of the gentle rus...ing

Waster recogn zed me in the morning

He didn't wake until Ian showed up to escort me back, the cornfield was due to be cleared of the old stakes. I promised Doc I would bring him breakfast before I got to work. The very last thing I d d was to carefully loosen my numb fingers, freeling them from Water's grasp.

His eyes opened. "Wanda" he whispered.

"Walter" I wasn't sure how long he would know me, or if he would remember last night. His hand clutched at the empty our so I gave him my left, the one that wasn't dead.

"You came to see me. That was nice I know with the others back must be bard for you Your face."

He seemed to be having a difficult time making his lips form the words and his eyes went in and out of focus. How like him, that his first words to me would be full of concern.

"Everything's fine, Walter How are you feelinge"

"An -- "He grouned quietly. "Not so Doc?"

"Right here" Doc murmured. Cosc behind me

"Got any more aquor?" he gasped.

"Of course."

Doc was already prepared. He had the mouth of a thick glass bottle to Walter's slack Lps and carefully poured the dark brown inquicin slow drips into his mouth. Walter winced as each sip burned down his throat. Some of it included out the side of his mouth and onto his pillow. The smell stung my nose.

"Better-" Doc asked after a long moment of slow pouring. Walter grunted. It didn't sound like assent. His eyes closed "More?" Doc asked.

Waiter granaced and then mouned

Doc cursed under his breath "Where's lared?" he muttered I stiffened at the name. Me amo starred and then drafted again Walter's face sagged. His head roued back on his neck

"Walter?" I whispered.

"The pains too much for him to stay conscious. Let him be"

Doeseid

My throat felt swollen "What can I do?"

Doe's voice was acsolate. "About as much as I can. Which is nothing. I'm useless."

"Don't be like that, Doc," I heard Ian marmor "This isn't your fault. The world Joesn't work the way it used to. No one expects more of you."

My shoulders hunghed inward. No, their world Jian't work the same way anymore.

A finger topped my arm "Let's go," Ian whispered

I nouded and slarted to pilling hand free again

Walter's eyes rollted open inseeing "Cladate? Are you here?" he implored

"Um I'm here" I said uncertainly, letting his higgers lock around mine

lan shrugged. "I get you both some tood." he whispered and then he left

I waited anxiously for him to return innerved by Waiter's misconception. Waiter matimized Gladys's name over and over but he add at seem to need anything from melitor which I was grateful. After a while, half an hour mivbe. I began listening for Ian's tootsteps in the tunnel wondering what could be taking him solong.

Doc stood by his desk the whole time starting into northing with his short dersishinged. It was easy to see how use essible tell.

And then I did hear something but it wasn't footsteps.

"What is that?" I asked Doc in a whisper. Walter was quiet again maybe unconscious. I didn't want to disturb him.

Doc turned to lock at melloocking his head to the side at the same time to listen.

The noise was a full vithrumming a fast soft beat I thought I heard tiget list a little louder but then it seen ediquierer again

"That's word." Doc said: "I almost sounds like: " He paused, his forehead farrowing in concentration as the untantalar sound faded."

We were listening intentity so we heard the foots eps when it es were still for away. They aid not march the expected, even pace of lans return. He was run ing — no, sprinting

Doc reacted immediately to the sound of trouble. He jogged quickly out to meet lan. I wished I could see what was wrong, too but I didn't want to upset Walter by trying to free my hand again. I his tened hard instead.

"Beandte" I beard Doc say in surprise

"Where is it? Where is it?" the or or man deman led breath essly. The running toots apsionly paused for a second, her started up again, not quite as fast.

"What are you talking about?" Doc asked, calling back this way

"The parasite" Brandt hissed impatiently, anxious v. as he burst through the arched entry.

Brandt was not a big man like Kyle or Ian, he was probably only a few inches tailer than me, but he was thick and soild as a rhinoceros. His eves swept the room, his piercing gaze thoused on my face for half a second, then took in Walter's oblivious form, and then raced around the room only to end up on me again.

Doc caught up with Brandt then, his long fingers gripping Brandt's shoulder just as the broader man took the first step in my direction

"What are you doing?" Doc asked this voice the closest to a grow! I'd ever heard it

Before Brandt answered the odd sound returned, going from soft to screaming load to soft again with a suddenness that had as a frozen. The beads thudded right on top of one another, shaking the air when they were at their loudest.

"Is that is that a belicopter?" Doc asked, whispering.

"Yes," Brandt whispered back. "It's the Seeker—the one from betore, the one who was boking for it." He jerked his often at mo

My throat was suddenly too small—the breaths moving through it were that and shallow not enough. I feet dizzy

No Not now Please

Who is her problem. Mel sharted in my head. Why can't she teare us alone?

We can't let ber burt them!

But how do we stop ber?

I don't know. This is all my fault'

Mine, too, Wanda Ours

"Are you sure?" Doc asked.

"Kyle got a clear view through the binoculars while it was hovering. Same one he saw before."

"Is it looking bere?" Does voice was suddenly horrabed. He half spun eyes flashing toward the exit. "Where's Sharone"

Brandt shook his head. "It's aist running sweeps. Starts at Picacho, then fans out in spokes. Doesn't look like it's focusing on anyting cose. Circles around a few times where we dumped the car."

"Sharon?" Doc asked again

"She's with the kids and Lucina. They're fine. The poys are gerting takings packed in case we have to roll tonight, but leb says it's not likely."

Doc exhaled then paced over to his desk. He slouched against it looking as if he dilust run a long race. "No it's nothing new, really." he murmured.

"Naw Just have to lay low for a few days." Brand, reassured him His eyes were flickering around the room again, settling on me every other second. "Do you have any rope handy?" he asked. He pulled up the edge of the sheet on an empty cot, examining it.

"Rope?" Doc echoed blankly.

"For the parasite. Kyle sent me but here to secure a."

My must as contracted involuntiarily my hand gripped Walter's tingers too lightly and he whimpered I tried to force it to relax while I kept my eves on Brandt's hard face. He was walting for Docespectant.

"You're here to secure Wanda?" Doc said his voice hard again "And what makes you think that's necessary?"

"Come on Doc Don't be stupid. You've got some big vents in here and a lot of reflective metal." Brandt gest: red to a file cab net against the far wall. "You let your attention wander for half a minute, and it be flashing signess to that Seeker."

I sucked in a shocked breath it was fould in the still room.

"See?" Brandt sall. "Guessed its plan in one"

I wanted to outly myse it under a boulder to hade from the balging relentless eves of my Seeker, yet he imagined I wanted to guide her in. Bring her here to kill lamie, Jared, Jeb, Jan. — I feat like gagging.

"You can go. Brandt," Duc sall, to an icy tone "I will keep an eye on Wanda."

Branch tassed one evebrow. "What happened to you guys? To you and Ian and Trudy and the rest? It's a ke you're a hypnotized. If your eyes weren't right. I'd have to wonder."

"Go ahead and wonder al. you want. Brandt. But get out while you're doing it."

Brandt shook his head. "I've got a job to do."

Doc waited lowerd Brandt stopping when he was between Brandt and me. He foliced his arms across his chesi.

"You're not going to touch her"

The throbbing belicopter blades sounded in the distance. We were all very still not breathing, antil they faded

Brandt shook his head when it was quiet again. He didn't speak, he just went to the desk and picked up Doc's chair. He carried it to the war, by the file cachnet, slammed it to the ground, and then say down hard, making the meta negs squear against the stone. He teaned for ward, his hands on his knees, and stared at me. A vulture waiting for a dying hare to stop moving.

Doc's jaw tightened, making a little popping noise

"Gracys" Walter mattered, surfacing from bis dazed sleep. "You're here."

Too nervous to speak with Branct watching 1, list parted his hand. His clouded eyes searched my face, seeing features that weren't there

"It hurts, Gladdie It hurts a lot."

"I know," I whispered. "Doc?"

He was already there, the brandy in hand "Open up. Waster"

The sound of the holicopter thumped quiet vi for away but still much too close. Doc fluiched and a few drops of brandy splattered on my arm.

It was a horr big day. The worst of my life on this planet, even including my first day in the caves and the last hot, dry day in the desert, hours from death.

The holicipier circled and circled Somet mes more than an hour would pass, and I would thank it was heally over. Then the sound would come back, and I would see the Seeker's obstinate face in my head, her protrowing eves scouring the hank desert for some sign of humans. I tried to will her away, concentrating hard on my memories of the desert's tratureless, coincless plain, as if I could somehow make sure she saw nothing else, as if I could bore her into leaving

Brandt never took his si spicious stare off of me. I could always feel it, though I rarely looked at him. It got a little better when Ian came back with both breakfast and lanch. He was all carty from packing in case of an evacuation. I whatever that meant. Did they have anywhere to go? Ian scowled so hard he looked like Kyle when Brandt explained.

in chipped phrases why he was there. Then lan chagged another empty could be side in the so that he chald sit in Branish's line of sight and back his view.

The helicopter Brandt's a strust of watch, these we enot ready so bad. On an orderary day — if there was really such a thing any more either one of these might have seemed agon zing. Today they were nothing

By noon. Doe had given Walter the last of the brandy. It seemed ke only minutes after hat Walter was with hing, moaning and gasping for breath. It's fingers brilised and challed mine, but it I ever pulled away his means turned to shirt screams. I dicked our once to see the afterne Brands for owen me which make Ian feel like he had to come too. By the time we got back—after nearly running the whole way. Walter screams no longer sounded burnan. Does face was holic with echoled apony. Walter quieted after I spoke to him for a moment, etting him hink his wie was near. It was an easy has a kind one. Brands made in encases of territation, but I knew that he was already to be inset. Northing mat ered beside Walters pain.

The whimpers and the wir bug continuous though and Branck paced back and forth at the other end of the room trying to be as far from the sound as possible.

lamie cane looking for me bringing tood enough for four when the light was growing braiget overhead. I would talet him stay. I made fan take him back to the kitchen to eat made fall promise to watch him all night so he would it sneak back here. Waiter couldn't he pishriek lightlen his twisting moved his broken legical differential of it was nearly unbearable. I mile shouldn't have this night burned into his memory the way it was id surely be burned into Doors and mine. Perhaps Braid's as we lith high he did whathe could to ignore Walter programs to ears and his mining a dissonant time.

Due and not the teldistance himself from Walter's hideous suffering instead he suffered with him. Walter's cites carved deep and sin Due's not like a law taken his sain.

It was strange to see such dop his of compassion in a human particular. Doc I could it look at him the same way after watching him we Waller's pain. So great was his compassion, he seemed to heed ternally with a As I watched it became impossible to be iere that

Doc was a cruel person, the man simply could not be a forturer. I tried to remember what had been said to found my conjectures. I had any one made the accusation outright? I didn't think so. I must have amped to false conclusions in my terror.

I doubted I could ever mistrust Doc again after this nightmansh day. However, I would a ways find his hospital a hornble place.

When the last of the daylight disappeared, so did the he icopier. We sat in the dark less not daring to turn on even the dim bine light. It took a few hours before any of us would be leve the hum was over. Branch was the first to accept it held had enough of the hospital, too.

"Makes sense for it to give up." he multered ledging out the exit." Nothing to sec at night it house ake your light with me. Doc so that lebis pet parasite can't get up to anything, and he on my way."

Doc didn't respond didn't even look at the suiten man as he left

"Make it stop. Gladdie make it stop." Walter begged me. I wiped the sweat from his face while he crushed my hand.

Time seemed to saw down and stop, the black right felt unending. Walter's screams got more and more frequent, more and more excruciating.

Me arise was at away knowing she could do nothing use til. I would have hidden too it Waiter hadn't needed me. I was a lalone in my head exactly what I had once wanted. It made me feel lost

Eventually a cum gray light started to creep in through the high vents overhead. I was hovering on the erige of sleep. Walter's moans and screams keeping me from sinking under. I could hear Doc snoring behind me. I was glad that he dibect able to escape for a little white.

I didn't hear Jacob come in I was mumbing weak assurances, barely coherent living to calm Waller

"Im here I'm here" I murmared as he cried out his wite's name. "Shir, it's okay." The words were meaningless. It was something to say though and it did seem that my voice calmed the worst of his cries.

I won't know how long Jared watched ine with Walter better I realized he was there. It must have been a while I was sure his first read tool would be anget but when I heard him speak, his voice was coo-

"Doe" he said and I heard the cot behind me shake "Doe, wake up."

I jerked my hand free, whirling, disoriented, to see the fare that went with the unmistakable voice.

His eyes were on me as he shook the sleeping man's shoulder. They were impossible to read in the diminght. His face had no expression at all.

Melante olded into awareness. She pored over his features, trying to read the thoughts behind the mask.

"G'addie Dont leave" Dont, " Walter's screech had Doc bosting upright, nearly capsizing his con-

I spun back to Walter showing my sore hand into his searching fingers

"Shihh shihh waiter I'm here I won't leave I won't, I promise"

He quieted down waimpering like a small child. I wiped the damp cloth over his forehead. It is sobite ched and furned into a sigh

"What's that about?" Jared murmured behind me

"She's the best painfuller I've been able to find." Doc said wear y
"Well. I've found you something better than a tame Seeker."

My stomach knotted and Melante hissed in my head Sc stupially buildly subborn she growled. He wouldn't believe you if you sold him the sun sets in the west

But Doc was beyond caring about the slight to me. "You found something!"

"Morphine there's not much I would have gotten here sooner if the Seeker hadn't pinned me down out there"

Doc was instantly in action I heard him rustling through some thing papery, and he crowed in delight. 'Jured, you're the miracle man!"

"Doc just a sec . "

But Dot was at my side already his haggard face at ght with anticipation. His hands were bit sy with a small syringe. He stack the tiny needle into the crease at Walter's elbow on the arm that was attached to me. I turned my face away. It seemed so horribly invasive to stab something through his skin.

I couldn't argue with the results though. Within half a minute

Waitet's entire body relaxed melling in o a pile of loose flesh against the thin mattress. His breathing went from harsh and argent to whispery and even. His hand relaxed, treeling mine.

I massaged my left hand with my right, trying to bring the blood back to my hingert ps. Little prick as followed the flow of blood inder my skin.

"Uh Doc, there really isn't enough for that" Jared murmureu.

I looked up from Walter's face, peaceful at last, Jared had his back to me, but I could see the surprise in Doos expression.

"Enough for what? I'm not going to save this for a rainy day Jared. I'm sure we'll wish we had it again, and too soon, but I'm not going to let Walter scream in agony while I have a way to help bim?"

"That's not what I meant" Jared said. He spoke the way he did when he diamenes a rought about something long and hard. Slow and even, like Walter's breath.

Doc frowned, confused.

"There's enough to stop the pain for maybe three or tout days, that's a: " Jared said. "If you give i, to him in doses."

I dian't understand what lated was saying, but Doc day

"Ab" he's ghed. He't irned to look at Waller again, and I saw a'r m of fresh tears start to pora above his lower ads. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out

I wanted to know what they were talking about, but Jared's presence made me silent, brought back the reserve I rarely telt the need for anymore

"You can't save him. You can only save him pain. Doc."

"I know" Doc said. His voice broke, like he was holding back a sob, "You're right."

What's going one I asked. As long as Melanie was going to be around. I'm ghe as well make use of her

They re going to kul Waner, she told me matter or factly. There's mough morphine to give run an overdose.

My gasp sounded foud in the quet room, but it was really ust a breath I didn't look up to see how the two healthy men would react. My own tears pooled as I leaned over Walter's piliow.

No. I thought, no. Not yet. No.

You'd rather he died screaming?

I just I can't stand be finanty. It's so absolute I is never see my friend again.

Here many of your other tries its have you gone hack to tisit. Was deter?

The never and friends like this before

My triends on other planets were all blurred together in my head, the souls were so similar, almost interchangeable in some ways. Waiter was distinctly himself. When he was gone, there would be no one who could full his place.

I cradled Walter's head in my arms and ret my fears fail onto his skin. I tried to stifle my crying but it made its way out regardless, a keening rather than sobs.

I know Another first, Mc and whispered and there was compassion in her tone. Compassion for me — that was a first, too

"Wanda?" Doc asked

I just shook my head, not able to answer

"I think you've been here too long." he said. I felt his hand light and warm, on my shoulder. "You should take a break."

I shook my beau again, still keen ng soft y

"You're worn out," le said. "Go clean up stretch your legs. Eat something."

I glared up at him "Will Walter be here when I get back "I mumbled through my tears.

His eyes tightened anxiously "Do you want that?"

"I'd like a chance to say goodbye. He's my triend."

He patted my arm "I know, Wanda I know Mr too I m in no harry. You get some air and then come back. Walter will be sieep og for a while."

I read his worn face, at J I believed the sincer ty there

I needed and carefully put Walter's head back on the pillow. Maybe if I got away from this piace for a - the bit, I'd hind a way to handle this. I wasn't sure how — I had no experience with real goodbyes.

Because I was in love with him no matter that it was unwilling, I had to look at Jared before I left. Me, wanted this too but wished that she detail somehow exclude me from the process.

He was starting it me. I had a feet ng his eyes had occor on me for a

long time. His face was carefully composed but there was surprise and suspicion in there again. It made me tired. What would be the point of acting out a characterow, even if I were that talented a liar? Walter would never stand up for me again. I couldn't sucker him anymore.

I met lared's gaze for one long second, then lurned to hurry down the pitch-black corridor that was brighter than his expression

Ambushed

he caves were quiet the sin had not yet risen. In the big piaza, the mirrors were a pair gray with the coming dawn

My few clothes were sull in Jamie and Jared's room I shuck in, glad that I knew where Jared was

lamic was sound as eep, carried into a tight hall to the top corner of the mattress. He didn't us, any sleep so compactly, but he had good reason to at the moment. Fan was sprawted across the rest of the space, has feet and hands hanging off the edges, one appendage to each of the four sides.

For some reason, this was bysterical to me. I had to put my fist in my moreth to choke back the laughter as I quickly snatched up my old dirt died. I shirt and shorts. I harried into the hall, still stifling the giggles.

You're suppappy. Melante told me. You need some sleep

t Il weip lace. Then I couldn't finish the thought. It sobered the instantaneously, and everything was quiet again.

I was still rushing as I headed for the bathing room. I trusted Doc

but Maybe he would change his mind. Maybe Jared would argue against what I wanted I couldn't be all day.

I thought I heard something behind me when I reached the octopus-like juncture where all the sleeping has simet I looked back, but I couldn't see anyone in the dim cave. People were beginning to stirt boon it would be time tot breakfast and another day of work. If hev'd finished with the stalks, the ground in the east helds would need to be turned. Maybe I would have time to be possible.

I to lowed he familiar path to the underground rivers, my mind in a million of her places. I couldn't seem to concentrate on anything in particular. Every time I tried to focus on a subject. Water fared, breakfast, chores, baths — some other shought would put my head away in seconds. Melanic was right. I needed to sleep, 55e was last as muchaled. Her thoughts all span around lared, but she could make nothing coherent of them, either

I digotten used to the bathing room. The after blackness of it uithout bother me anymore. So many places were black here. It all my daylight hours were lived in liarkness. And I uitheen here too many times. There was never anything airking a order the water's surface, wasting to pull me under.

I knew I didn't have time to soak ithough. Others would be up soon, and some people liked to start their day clean. I got to work, washing myscit first, then moving on to my clothes. I scrubbed at my shirt fiercely, wishing I could scrub ont my memory of the past two nights.

My hands were stinging when I was done, the dry cracks on my knuckles burning worst of all a rinsed them in the water but it made no noticeable difference. I sighed and combod out to get thessed.

I dieft my dry clothes on the loose rocks in the back corner. I kicked a stone by accident, hard enough to burt my bure foot, and it clattered foully across the room, bounting off the wall and landing with a plunk and a girgue in the pool. The sound made me lamp, though it wasn't all that bould next to the roar of the hot river in the outer foom.

I was last showing my feet into my scrutty tennes shoes when my turn was up.

"Knock, knock," a familiar voice called from the dark entry

"Good morning. Ian " I said. "I'm just cone. Did you sieup would"

"Ian's still sleeping." Ian's voice answered. "I'm stire that won't last forever though, so we'd best get on with this."

Spiriters of ice printed my joints in place I couldn't move I couldn't breathe.

I'd noticed it before and then forgotten it in the long weeks of Kyle's absence not only did har and his brother look very much alike but—when Kyle spoke at a normal volume, which so tarely happened—they also had exactly the same voice

There was no air. I was trapped in this black hole with Kyle at the door. There was no way out.

Keep quiet. Mc anie shricked in my head

Lebula do that. There was no air to scream with

Lasten

I did as I was told trying to focus in spite of the fear that staboed through my head like a million slender spears of ice.

I coulant hear anything. Was Kine wa ting for a response? Was he snearing around the room in silence? I listened harder, but the rush of the river covered any sounds

Quick, grab a rock! Me anie orderec.

Why?

I saw myself crashing a rough stone against Kyle's head.

I can't do it!

Then were going to die she screamed back at me I can ao it. Let me

There has to be another way. I mosned but I forced my cellocked knees to bend. My hands searched the darkness and came up with a large pagged rock and a handful of pebbles.

Fight or flight.

In desperation I tried to an lock Melante to let her out. I couldn't find the door — my hands were still my own clutched uselessly around the objects I could never make into weapons.

A noise. A tiny splash as something entered the stream that drained the poor into the lattine room. Only a few yards away.

Give me my hands!

I don't know how! Take them!

I started to creep away crose to the wall toward the exit Melanie

strugg ed to find her way out of my head, but she couldn't find the door from her side, either

Another sound. Not by the far stream. A breath, by the exit. I froze where I was,

Where is be?

I don't know!

Again I could hear nothing but the river. Was Kyle alone? Was someone waiting by the door to catch me when he herded me around the pool? How close was Kyle now?

I to to the hairs on my arms and legs standing on end. There was some kind of pressure in the air as though I could lee, his swent movements. The upon I hall turned leasing back in the direction I'd come away from where I diheard the breath.

He couldn't wait forever. The lift cine I said told hie he was in a hurry. Someone could come at any time. Ouds were on his side though. There were tewer who would be inclined to stop him than there were who hight think this was for the best. And of those inclined to stop him, even fewer who a have much of a chance of doing that. Only Jen and his gun would make aid flerence. Jared was at east as strong as Kyle, but Kyle was more motivated. Jared would probably not fight him now.

Another noise. Was that a tootstep by the door? Or just my imagination? How long bac this sclent standaft listed? I couldn't guess how many seconds or minutes had passed.

Get reads. Metante knew that the stailing would soon be at an end. She wanted me to thench the rock tighter.

But I would give flight a chance first. I would not be an effective tighter even if I could oring myself to try. Ny e was probably twice my weight, and he had a much longer reach.

I raised the hand with the pebbles and almed them, oward the back passage to the laterne. Maybe I could make him think that I was going to hide and hope for rescue. I threw the handful of small stones and shield away from the noise when they clattered against the rock wall.

If he breath at the door again, the sound of a light for fall headed toward my decay if edged as quickly along the wall as I could

What if there are two?

I don t know

I was almost the the exit. It I could just make the runne. I thought I could not tun him. I was agreed and fast.

I heard a footstep, very clearly this time, disrupting the stream in the back of the room. I crept faster

A grants, splash shat ered the rense stands it. Water pelicoling skin making melgaspili shat ered against the wall in a wave of wer sound.

He's coming through the pool! Run!

I has tated just a second too long. Big it igers clutched at my calf my ankie I vanked against he published light mand. I st imbled and the mementum that threw me down to the floor make his tingers is pi He caught my speaker. I knoked it off, leaving it in his hand.

I was down but he was down too. It gave me enough time to scramble forward inpping my knees against the rough stone.

Kvie granted and his hand clatchest at my naked heel is here was anthing to carch hold of I sho tree again. I wrenched myse to orward pulling to my feet with my head still down, every second in danger of talling again hecause my body was moving almost parallel to the floor. I kept my balance through sheer force of will.

There was no one case. No one to catch me as the exit to the outer form a sprinted forward hope and adrer aline surging in my veins. I do not the river room at the speed invident thought to reach the name. I could hear Kyle's heavy breath close behind but not close enough. With each step. I pushed hurder against the ground throwing myself ahead of him.

Pain lanced through my legicrumping it

Over the bubble of the river. I heard two heavy stones hit the ground and full—the one I dibeen carehing and the one held thrown to tripple me. My legitalisted under me, spinning me backward to the ground and in the same second he was or top of me.

It's weight knocked my head against the rick in a ringing how and pinned me that against the floor. No reverage

Scream!

The air blow out of me in a sirence sound that surprised us all. My wordless shrick was more than I d hoped for — surely someone would hear it. Please let that someone be leb. Please let tim have the gun.

"Ubing " Kyle protested H s hand was big enough to cover most of my face. His paim mashed against my mouth, cutting off my scream.

He roued then land the metion so took me by surprise that I had no time to try to find an advantage in it. He placed me swiftly over and under and over his body. I was dizzy and confused my head still spinning, but I understood as soon as my face hit the water.

Has hand locked on the back of my neck, forcing my face, no the shallow stream of a local water that wound its way, into the bathing pool. It was too late to hold my breath and already anhaled a mouthful of water.

My body panicked when the water hit my lings. Its flating was stronger than held expected. My limbs all jerked and thrashed in different directions, and his grip on my neck slipped. He tried to get a better hold, and some instinct made me pull myself into him rather than away as he was expecting. I only pulled half a foot closer to him, but that got my chin out of the stream, and enough of my mouth to choke some of the water back out and drag in a breath.

He fought to push me back into the stream, but I wriggled and wedged myself ander him so that his own weight was working against his goal. I was still reacting to the water in my langs, coughing and spasming out of control.

"Enough!" Kyle growled.

He pulled himself off me, and I tried to drag myself away

"Oh, no, you don't." he spit through his teeth

It was over and I knew it.

There was something wrong with my in ared leg littelt numb and I contain timake it do what I warded I could only push mystif along the floor with my arms and my good leg. I was coughing too hard to do even that we . Too hard to scream again.

Kyle grabbed my wrist and vanked me up from the floor. The weight of my body made my leg buckle, and I sumped into him.

He got both my wrists in one hand and wrapped the other arm around my waist. He pulled me off the floor and into his side, ake an awkward bag of flowr. I twisted, and my good, ag kicked against the empty air.

"Let's get this over with."

He amped over the smaller stream with a bound and carried me toward the closest's rightout. The strain from the hot spring washed my face.

He was going to throw me into the dark mor hole and let the boring water pull me into the ground as it burned me

"No, no "I shouted my voice too hoarse and low to carry

writhed france y. My knee knocked against one if the ropy rock culumns and I hooked my foot around it trying to vank live to of his grip. He jerked me free with an impatient grunt.

At least that loosened his hold enough that I could make one more move. It had worked before, so I tried it again. Instead of trying to free myself. I twisted in and wrapped my legs around his we'st looking the good ankie around the bad, trying to ignore the pain so that I could get a good hold there.

"Get off me you —" He tought to knock me loose and I jerked one of my wrists free. I wrapped that arm around his neck and grabbed his thick hair at I was going into the black river so was he

Kyle hissed and stopped prving at my leg long enough to punch my side.

I gasped in pain but git my other hand into his hair

He wrapped both arms are and me as if we were embracing rather than locked in a killing struggle. Then he grabbed my waist from both sides and heaved with all his strength against my hold.

His hair started to come out in my hands, but he lust grunted and pulled harder.

I could hear the steaming water rushing close by high below me tiseemed. The steam billowed up in a thick cloud, and for a minute I couldn't see anything but Ky e's tace, twisted with rage into something beastlike and merciless.

I eat my bad log going. I ned to pull myself closer to him, but his brute strength was withing against my desperation. He would have me tree in a moment, and I would all into the hissing steam and disappear.

Jured Jame. The thought, the agony brionged to both Melaine and me. They would never know what had happened to me. Ian. Jeb. Doc, Walter. No goodbyes.

Kyle abruptly jumped into the air and came down with a third. The tarring impact had the effect he wanted my legs came loose

But before he could take advantage, there was another result

The cracking sound was deafening. I thought the whole cave was coming down. The floor shuddered beneath us

kyle gasped and amped back, taking me hands still locked in his hair — with him. The rock under his teet with more cracking and groaming, began to crumble away.

Our combined weight had broken the brittle up of the hole. As Kyle stambled away, the crambling followed his heavy steps. It was taster than he was:

A piece of the floor disappeared from under his heel, and he went down with a third. My weight pushed him back hard, and his head smarked sharpiv ago not a stone piller. His arms fell away from mellimp.

The cracking of the floor settled into a sustained groan. I could feel it shiver beneath Kyle's body.

I was on his chest. Our legs dangled above empty space, the steam condensing into a mill on drops on our skin.

"Kyle?"

There was no answer

I was afeard to move

You we got to get off from You're too beauty together. Carefully—use the pillar Pull away from the hole.

Whimpering in tear too terrified to think for myself. I did as Melanic ordered. I freed my fingers from Kyle's hair and climbed gangerly over his unconscious form, using the pill ar as an anchor to pill myself forward. It felt steady enough, but the floor still mounted under us.

I pulsed myself past the prisar and onto the ground beyond it. This ground stayed firm ander my bands and knees, but I scrambled far ther away toward the safety of the exit turnel.

There was another crack, and I guarded back. One of Kyle's legs drooped further down as a rock fell from benea hit. I heard the splash this time as the chank of stone met the over below. The ground shaddered under his weight.

He's going to fall, I realized.

Good. Melanie snarled.

but

ty he fairs he can seil, us Wanaa I, he doesn't fail he wit. I can't just

Yes, you can Walk away Don't you want to me?

I did. I wanted to live

Kyle could disappear. And if he did, there was a chance that no one would ever hart me again. At least not among the people here. There was still the Seeker to consider that maybe she would give up someday, and then I could stay here indefinitely with the humans I loved...

My eg throbbed pain replacing some of the numbness. Warm fluid trickled down my ups. I tasted the moisture without thinking and resuzed it was my blood.

Walk away, Wanacrer I want to use I want a chince too

I could feel the tremors from where I s ood. Another piece of floor splashed into the river. Kyle's weight shifted, and he sud an inch toward the hole.

Let how go

Melanie knew petter than I what she was talking about. This was her world. Her rules.

I stared at the face of the man who was about to die—the man who wanted me dead. With him unconscious. Eyle's face was no longer that of an angry anima. It was relaxed almost peaceful

The resemblance to his brother was very apparent

No! Melanie protested.

I crawled back to him on my hands and knees—slowly feeling the ground with care before each such I moved. I was too afraid to go beyond the privar so I hooked my good leg around it an anchor again, and leaned around to wedge my hands under Kyle's arms and over his chest.

I beaved so hard I nearly pulled my arms from their sockets, but he dawn timove. I heard a sound, like the trickle of sand through an hour glass as the floor continued to dissolve into thry pieces.

I vanked again, but the only result was that the trickle sped up. Shifting his weight was breaking the floor faster.

Just as I thought that a large chank of rock plummered into the river, and Kyle's precarious balance was overthrown. He began to fall.

"No?" I screamed the siren bursting from my throat again. I flat tened myse t against the colonin and managed to pin bim to the other side, locking my bands around his wide chest. My arms ached

"Help mc" I shrieked "Somebody Help."

Doubted

nother splash. Kyle's weight tortured my arms "Wondar Wanda"

"Help me! Kyie! The floor! Help!"

I had my face pressed against the stone my eyes toward the cave entrance. The light was bright overhead as the day dawned. I held if y breath. My arms screamed.

"Wanda" Where are you?"

Ian leaped through the door the rifle in his hands, he dook and ready. His face was the angry mask his brother had worn

"Wat 'h out " I screamed at him. "The floor is breaking up ' I can t hoid him much longer."

It took him two long seconds to process the scene that was so different from the one held been expecting. Kyle trying to kill me. The scene that had been just seconds ago.

Then he threw the gim to the cave floor and started toward me with a long stride

"Get down — disperse your weight!"

He dropped to all for is and scuttled to me it aleyes burning in the light of dawn.

"Don't let go," he cautioned.

I groaned in pain

The assessed for another second, and then slid his body behand in the pashing me closer to the rock. His arms were longer than mine. Even with me in the way, he was able to get his bands around his brother.

"One, two, three," he grunted

He palled Kyle up against the rock much more securely than I dhad him. The movement smashed my face into the pillar. The bad side, though in a couldn't get much more scarred at his point.

"I'm going to pull him to this slice. Can you squeeze out?".
"I'll try."

I coscined my hold on Ny eliteeing my shoulders ache in reset making sure fair had him. Then I wrigg od out from between lan and the rock, careful not to put myself in a dangerol sisection of the floor crawled backward a few feet toward the door ready to make a grab for lan if he started slipping

Inthacted his mert brother around one's de of the pill ar dragging him in jerks, a foot at a time. More of the floor crambies, but the toundation of the pillar remained intact. A new shelf formed about two feet out from the column of rock.

lan crawled backward the way I had dragging his prother along in smort surges of mascle and will. Within a minute, we were all three in the mouth of the corndor, I an and I breathing in gasps.

"What., the hell , happened?"

"Our weight was too much Floor caved in "

"What were you doing by the edger With Kyler"

I put my bean down and concentrated on breathing

Welt, teli him

What will happen then?

You know what was happen have broke the rules leb who shoot him or they like k him out. Maybe land who heat the short out of him first. That would be fun to watch

Melanic audnit really mean it. I due think so anyway She was ust st. mad at me for risking our lives to save our would be mardeter

Exactly I tolo her And if they kick Kyie ou, for me or kill him

I shuddered. Well can't you see how in evense hat would make? He s

one of you

We be got a life here. Wanda. You're jeopardizing that

It's my life, too And I'm well, I'm me

Melanie grouned in disgust

"Wandar" Ian demanded

"Nothing," I muttered.

"You're a rotten har. You know that, right?"

I kept my heast down and breathed.

"What did he do?"

"Nothing," Lifed. Poorly.

Ign pat his hand under my thin ipalied my face up. "Your nose is bleeding." He twisted my head to the side. "And there's more blood in your hait."

"I tut my head when the floor fell."

"On both sides?"

I shrugged

Ian gared at the for a long moment. The darkness of the tunnel muted the brilliance of his eyes.

"We should get Kyle to Doc — he read when he went down."

In had one arm around Kyle—he a compact that way and seemed too tired to move. Now he shoved his unconscious brother away roughly, a ding tarther from him in disgust. He slid into me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. He pulled me those against his chest — I could feel his breath go in and out at a more ragged than normal.

It fest very strange.

"I should rou him right back in there and kick him over the edge myseif."

I shook my head frantica ly making a throb in pain "No."

"Saves time. Jeh made the rules clear. You try to hurt someone here, there are penalties. There is be a tribunal."

I tried to pull away from him, but he tightened his grip. It wasn't frightening not like the way Kyle had grabbed me. But it was apsetting—it threw me off balance. "No. You can't do that because no one broke the rules. The floor collapsed, that's a ."

"Wanda -- "

"He's your brother."

"He knew what he was doing He's my brother yes, out he did what he did and you are you are my friend."

"He did nothing. He is human" I whispered. "This is his place not mine."

"We're not having this discussion again. Your defin tion of human is not the same as mine. To you, it means something in negative. To me it a compliment is and by my definition, you are and he isn't. Not after this."

"Human isn't a negative to me. I know you now. But Ian he's your brother."

"A fact that shames me."

I pushed away from him again. This time, he let me go. It in ght have had something to do with the moan of pain that escaped my lips when I moved my leg.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so. We need to find Doc but I don't know it I can walk.

I hit my leg when I fed."

A growl strangled in his throat "Wlich leg? Let me see"

I tried to a raighten out my harrieg — t was the right one— and groaned again. His hands started at my ankie testing the bones, the roots. He totated my ankie carefully.

"Higher Here" I pulled his hand to the back of my thigh, just above the knee. I mounted again when he pressed the sore place. "It's not broken or anything. I don't think Just ready sore."

"Deep muses bruse at least" he mattered. "And how did this happen?"

"Must have anded on a rock when I for "

He sighed. "Okay let's get you to Doc."

"Kyle needs bun more than I do."

"I have to go find Doc anyway or some help. I can't catry Kyle that far but I can certainly carry you. Oops—hold on."

He turned abruptly and ducked back into the river mom. I decided I wouldn't argue with him. I wanted to see Walter before. Doe had promised to wait for me. Would that first dose of painkmer wear off soon? My head swam. There was so much to worry about and I was so lated. The adrenaume had drained leaving me empty.

han came back with the gun. I frowned because this reminded me that I'd wished for it before. I didn't like that

"Let's go."

Without thanking he handed the gun to me. I let it fall into my spen pains but I couldn't curl my hands around it. I decided it was a suitable punishment, to have to carry the thing.

Ian chackled "How anyone could be atraid of you..." he mumbled to himself

He picked me up easily and was moving before I was settled. I tried to keep the lenderest parts—the back of my head, the back of my leg—from resting on him too hard.

"How divour clothes get so wer?" he asked. We were passing under one of the fist sized say ights, and I could see the bint of a grim smale on his pale lips.

"I don't know" I muttered. "Steam?"

We passed into darkness again.

"You're missing a shoe,"

"Oh"

We passed through another beam of light, and his eyes flashed sapphire. They were senous now locked on my face.

"I'm print glace that you weren't hart. Wanda Hart worse, I should say."

I district answer I was afraid of giving him something to use against Kyle.

Jeb found is just before we hat the big cave. There was enough aght for me to see the sharp gant of curiosity in his eyes when he saw me in lan's arms, face blocking, the gain testing gangerly on my open hands.

"You were right then." Jeb guessed. The currosity was strong, but the stee. In bis cone was stronger. His jaw was tight beneath the fan of his beard. "I didn't hear a shot. Kyle?"

"He's unconscious", said in a rush. "You need to warn everyone—part of the floor collapsed in the river room. I don't know how stable it is now. Kyle hit his head really hard trying to get out of the way. He needs Doc."

Job raised one eyebrow so high it almost touched the faded bandanna at his hairline

"That's the story" Ian said, making no effort to concear his doubt.
"And she's apparently stacking to it."

Jeb laughed "Let me take that off your hands," he said to me

Liet him have the gun willingly. He laughed again at my expression.

"I is get Andy and Brandt to help me with Kyle We'll follow behind you."

"Keep a close eye on him when he wakes up." Ian said in a hard tone.

"Can do."

leb's outhed off, looking for more hands. Ian hurned me toward the hospital cave.

"Kyle could be really hart" [eb should harry."

"Kyle's head is harder than any rock in this place."

The ong tunnel felt longer than usual. Was Kyle dying despite my efforts? Was he conscious again and looking for me? What about Walter? Was he sleeping or gone? Had the Seeker given up her hant or would she be back now that it was light again?

Will fured structe with Doc^2 Mel added her questions to mine. Will be the angre when he sees you? Will be known me?

When we reached the sunfit southern cave. Jared and Doc Jian't look like they dimoved much. They leaned side by side, against Doc's makeshift desk. It was quiet as we approached. They weren't talking, just watching Walter sleep.

They started up with wide eves as Ian carried me into the light and laid me on the cot next to Walter's He straightened my right leg carefully.

Walter was snown. That sound eased some of my tension

"What now?" Due demanded angedy. He was bending over me as soon as the words were out wiping at the blood on my check

Jared's face was frozen in surprise. He was being careful include ting the expression give way to anything else.

"Kyle," Ian answered at the same time that I said. "The toor..."

Doc looked back and forth between us, confused.

Ian sighed and rolled his eyes. Absency he laid one hand I ght you my torellead. "The floor crumbled by the first river hole. Kyle he back and cracked his head on a rock. Wanda saved his worthless life. She says she fell, too, when the floor gave I Ian gave. Doc a meaningful look. "Something "he said the word sarcastically, "bashed the back of her head pretty good." He started listing. "Her nose is bleeding but not broken. I don't think She's got some damage to the muscle here." He louched my sore thigh. "Knees suced up pretty good, got her face again, but I think mayne I did that trying to pull Kyle out of the hole. Shouldn't have bothered." Ian muttered the last part

'Anything caser" Due asked. At that moment, his fingers, probing along my side reached the place where Kyle had punched me. I gasped.

Doc rugged my shirt up, and I heard both Ian and Jared hiss at what they saw

"Let me guess." Ian said in a voice like ce. "You tell on a rock."

"Good guess." Lagreed broath ass. Doc was still touching my side and I was trying to hold back whampers.

"Might have broken a rib not sure." Doc marmared. "I wish I could give you something for the pain..."

"Don't worry about that Doc " I panted "a mokay How's Walter?

Did he wake up at all?"

"No. it will take some time to sleep that dose off." Doc said. He look my hand and started bending my wrist, my albow.

"I'm okay."

His kind eyes were soft as he met my gaze. "You will be You or just have to test for a white III, keep an eye on you. Here, turn your head."

I did as he asked and then winced while he examined my wound. "Not here," Ian muttered

I could'at see Doc but Jared threw Ian a sharp now

"They re oringing Kyle. I'm not having them in the same room." Doc nodded. "Probably wise:"

"Ill get a place ready for her Ill need you to keep Kyle here until we decide what to do with him."

I started to speak, but Ian put his tingers on my ..ps

"All right." Doc agreed. "I is tie him down if yo want."

"If we have to, is it okay to move here" Ian glanced toward the tunnel, his face anxious

Doc hestrated

"No." I whispered. Ian's fingers still touching my mouth. " Walter I want to be here for Walter."

"You've saved all the lives you can save today. Wanga," Ian said, his voice gentle and sad.

"I want to say to say good goodhye."

Ian nodded. Then he looked at Jared. "Can I trust you?"

Jared's face flushed with anger. Ian held up his band.

"I don't want to leave her here unprotected while I had her a sate place." Ian said. "I don't know it Kyle will be conscious when he arrives. If Jeb shoots him it will upset her. But you and Dot should be able to handle him. I don't want Dot to be on I is own, and force Jeb's hand."

Jarc.J spike through clenched teeth. "Doc won't be on his own."

Inn hesitated. "She's been through hou in the past couple of days.

Remember that."

Jared nodded once, teeth star camped together

"[']] be here," Doc reminded Ian.

Ian met his guze "Okay" He leaned over me, and his illminous eyes he dimine "I'll be back soon. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not."

He ducked in and roughed his a ps to my forehead

No one was more surprised than I, though I heard Jared gasp quietly. My mouth hang open as Ian wheeled and nearly sprinted from the room

I heard Doc putt a breath in through his teeth line a backward whistle, "Well," he said

They both stared at me for a long moment. I was so tired and sore, I barely cared what they were thinking

"Doc " Jared started to say something in an argent tone, but a camor from the (unnel interrupted him

Five men stringgled through the opening lieb in front had Kyld's left leg in his arms. Was had the right leg and behind them. Andy and Auron worked to support his torso. Kyle's head folled back over Andy's shoulder.

"Stars, but he's heavy," Jeb grunted.

Jared and Doc sprang torward to help. After a few minutes of cursing and groaning, Kyle was lying on a cot a tew feet away from mine.

"How long has he been out. Wandar" Doc asked me. He pulled kyle's eyelids back, letting the sunlight shine into his pupils.

"I'm " I thought quickly "As long as I've been here, the ten mautes of so it took Ian to carry me here, and then maybe five more minutes before that?"

"At least twenty minutes, would you say?"

"Yes. Close to that."

While we were consulting, Jeb had made its own diagnosis. No one paid any attention as he came to stand at the head of Kyle's cot No one paid any attention — unpothe trithed an open bottle of water over Kyle's face.

"leb." Doe comp anec, knocking his hand away

But Kyle sputtered and blinked and then moaned "What hap pened? Where did it go?" He started to shift his weight trying to look around. "The floor ... is moving..."

Kyle's voice had my fingers eienching the sides of my cot and palic washing through me. My leg ached. Could I implaway? Slowly, perhaps

" Slokay," someone marmared. Not someone. I would a ways know that voice.

Jared moved to stand between my cut and loyies, his back to me his eyes on the big man. Kyle to led his head back and forth grouning.

"You're safe." lared said in a low voice. He didn't look at me. "Don't be afraid."

I took a deep breath

Meanie wanted to touch him. His hand was close to mine resting on the edge of my cot.

Please no. I tood her My face burts quite enough as it is! He won't bit you

You trank, I'm not souting to risk it

Melante's ghod, sho yearned to move toward, nm. It wouldn't have been so hard to bear if I weren't yearning a so

Give him aims 1 pleaded. Let him get used to us. Wast tin he realty helseves.

She sighed again

"Aw hell " Kyle grumbled. My gaze flickered toward him at the sound of his voice. I could just see his bright eyes around lared's elbow focused on me. "It aidn't fall " he complained.

Buried

ared unged forward, away from me With a fould smacking sound, his fist hit Kyle's face.

Kyte's eyes rolled back in his head, and his mouth fell stack. The room was very quiet for a few seconds.

"Um" Doc said in a mild voice "medically speaking, I'm not sure that was the mast helpful thing for his condition."

"But I feel better" Jared answered, sullen.

Doc smiled the traiest smile. "Well maybe a few more minutes of unconsciousness won't kill him."

Doe began woking under Kyle's lids again taking his pu se

"What happened?" Wes was by my head speaking in a murmite

"Kyle tried to k: "it " lared answered before I could "Are we ready surprised?"

"Did not," I muttered.

Wes looked at Jared.

"Altruism seems to come more naturally to it than hes." Jared noted.

"Are you trying to be annoying?" I demanded My patience wis not waning, but entirely gene. How long had it been since I dislept? The only thing that achee worse than my leg was my head. Every breath hart my side. I real zed with some suspicise, hat I was in a truly bad mood. "Because if you are, then be assured, you have succeeded."

ared and Wes looked at me with shocked eyes. I was sure that if I could see the others, their expressions would match. Maybe not Jeb s. He was the master of the poker face.

"I am female," I complained "That 'it business is really getting on my netves."

Jared banked in surprise. Then his face settled back into harder incs. "Because of the body you wear?"

Wes glared at him

"Because of me." I hissed

"By whose definition?"

"How about by yours? In my species I am the one that bears young Is that not temale enough for you?"

That stopped him short. I felt almost smug.

As you should. Melanie approved. He vicening, and he vicening a pigabout it.

Thank you.

We girls have to stick together

"That's a story you've never told us." Wes marmared, while Jared struggled for a rebottal. "How coes that works."

Wess olive-toned face darkened, as if he dijust realized he had spoken the words out loud. "I mean, I guess you don't have to answer that, if I'm being rude."

I aughed. My mood was swinging around wildly out of control Slaphappy. like Mel had said. "No you're not asking anything appropriate. We don't have such a complicated elaborate actup as your species." I laughed again, and then felt warmth in my face. I remembered only too clearly how elaborate it could be

Get your mind out of the gutter

It's your mind, I reminded her.

"Then ...?" Wes asked

I signed "There are only a few of us who are Mothers Nat

Mothers. That's what they call us but its just the potential to be one. "I was suber again. In hung of it. There were no Mothers, no surviving Mothers, only the memories of them.

"You have that poor or a 2" lared asked at tily

I know the others were listening. Even Doc had paused in the act of putting his ear to Kyle's chest.

I didn't answer his question. "We're — a little like your hives of bees, or your ans. Many many seriess members of the family and then the queen."

Queens" Wes repeated looking at me with a strange expression. "Not also that But there is in a one Mother for every five ten

thousand of my kind. Nemetimes less. There's no hard and fast rule?

"How many urones?" Wes wondered

"Oh, no there aren't drones. No. I told you is simpler than that "

They waited for me to explain I swanowed. I shouldn't have brought this up I suddit want to talk about it anymore. Was it really such a big thing to have lared call the latter.

They still waited. I frowned but then I spoke I distarted this. The Mothers divide Every cell. I gress you could call it though our structure soft the same as yours, becomes a new soul. Each new soul has a little of the Mother's memory, a piece of her that remains."

"How many cells?" Doc asked carrous, "How many young?"

I shrugged. "A million or so."

The eyes that I could see widened looked a citic wilder. I med not to feel bart when Wes or nged away from the

Doe whistled under his breath. He was the only one who was some interested in continuing. Aaron and Ancie had wary distribled expressions on their faces. They dinever heard me teach before. Never heard me speak so much.

"When foes tha happen? Is there a catalys,?" Doc asked

"It's a choice A voluntary choice." I so it him "It's the only way we ever will ngwichoose to die. A trade for a new generation."

"You could choose now to divide all your cells just like that?"

"Not quite just ake that, but ves."

"Is it complicated?"

"The decision is. The process is paintul."

"Painful?"

Why should that have surprised him so? Wasn't if the same for his kind?

Men. Mel snorted.

"Excruciating." I told film: "We all remember how it was for our Mothers."

Doc was stroking his chin entranced. "I wonder what the evolutionary track would be a prinduce a nive society with suiciding queens." He was lost on another plane of thought

"Altrusm," Wes murmured.

"Hmm," Doc said. "Yes, that"

I closed my eyes, washing my mouth had stayed closed. I felt dizzy Was I gist fired or was it my head wound?

"Oh" Doc martered "You've slept even less than I have, haven't you. Wandar We should let you get some rest."

"'M fine " I mumbled by I didn't open my eyes

"That's just great" someone said under his breath. "We've got a bloody *queen mother alien* laying with us. She could blow into a mutuon new buggers at any moment."

"Shh "

"They coundn't herr you." I told whoever it was, not opening my eyes. "Without host bodies, they would die quickw." I winced, imaginable grief. A million tiny hapless souls, they sivet babies, withering...

No one answered me ib at I could fee, their relief in the are

I was so tired. I didn't care that Kyle was three feet from me. I didn't care that two of the men. In the mom would side with Kyle. The came around. I didn't care about anything but sieep.

Of course, that was when Walter worke up

"Louh" he greated list a whisper "Criaduler"

With a groun of my own. I round toward him. The path in my legmade me wince, but I couldn't twist my torso. I reached out to him found his hand.

"Here," I whispered.

"Abh," Walter signed in relief.

Doe hashed the men who began to protest "Wanda's given up sleep and peace to help him through the pain. Her bands are brussed from holding his. What have you done for him."

Walter grouned again. The sound began low and guttura, but turned quickly to a high pitched whimper.

Doe with co. "Aaron Andy. Wes would you, an go get Sharon for me, please?"

"All of us?"

"Get out," Jeb translated

The only answer was a shutfling of feet as they left

"Wanda," Due whispered, close beside my car "He's in pain a can't let him come a.l the way around."

I theo to breathe evenly "It's better if he doesn't know me. It's better if he thinks Giaddie is here."

I pulled my eyes open. Jeb was beside Warter whose face still looked as if he slept.

"Bye Walt," Job said: "See you on the other side."

He stepped back.

"You're a good man. You'll be missed." Jared marmared

Due was fumbling in the package of morphine again. The paper crackled

"Gladdier" Welt sobbed. "It burts"

"Shith I, won't hart much longer. Doc will make it stop."

"Gladdie?"

"Yes?"

"I love you, Gladdie Tve loved you my whole I to long."

"I know Walter I - I love you, too You know how I love you."
Walter sighed.

I closed my eves when Doc leaned over Walter with the syringe "Sleep well, friend," Doc murmured

Water's fingers relaxed, loosened. I held on to them. I was the one clinging now.

The minutes passed, and all was quiet except my breathing. It was hatching and preaking, tending toward quiet sobs

Someone patted my shoulder "He's gone Wunda," Doc said his voice thick, "He's out of pain."

He pulled my hand free and rolled me carefully our of my awk

ward position into one that was less agonizing. But only slightly so Now that I knew Walter wouldn't be disturbed the sobs were not so quiet. I clutched at my side, where it throbbed.

"Oh, go ahead. You won't be happy otherwise." Jared muttered in a grudging tone. I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn't do it.

Something stung my arm. I dudn't remember having burt my arm. And in such a stronge place, just miside my e bow.

Morphine Melanie whispered.

We were already drifting now. I tried to be alarmed, but I contain to be. I was too far gone.

No one said goodsye I thought duty I couldn't expect Jared but Jeb ... Doc ... Ian wasn't here ...

No one's dying, she promised me Just sleeping this time

٠

When I woke, the celling above me was diministration. Nighttime There were so many stars. I wondered where I was. There were no black obstructions, no pieces of celling in my view. Just stars and stars and stars.

Wind tanned my face. It shelled like dust and something I couldn't put my finger on. An absence. The musty smell was gone. No sulfur, and it was so dry.

"Wandar" someone waspitted to tching my good cheek

My eyes found Ian's face, white in the starlight, leaning over me. His hand on my skin was cooler than the breeze, but the air was so dry it wasn't uncoinfortable. Where was Ir

"Wandar Are you awake? They won't wait any longer"

I whispered because he did "What?"

"They're starting already a knew you would want to be here"

"She comin' amund?" Jeb's voice asked

"What's starting?" I asked

"Wa ter's functal,"

I thed to sit up but my body was all rubbery. Jans hand moved of my forehead, holding me down.

I rentsted my head under his hand, trying to see

I was outside.

Outside

On my left, a rough, tumbled pile of boulders formed a miniative mountain, complete with scrubby brush. On my right, the desert plain stretched away from melidisappearing in the darkness. I looked down past my feet, and I could see the huddle of humans, in at ease in the open air. I knew just how they felt. Expused

I tried to get up again I wanted to be closer, to see I and restrained me.

"Lasy there" he said "Don't try to stand."

"Help me," I pleaded.

"Wanda?"

I heard Jamie's voice, and then I saw him his bair bobbing as he ran to where I was lying.

My fingertips traced the edges of the mat beneath me. How did I get here, sleeping under the stars?

"They aidn't wait " Jamie said to Ian. "It will be over soon "

"Help me up," I said

Jamie reached for my hand, but Ian shook his head, "I got her."

Jan slid his arms under me, very careful to avoid the worst of the sore spots. He pulled me up off the ground, and my head spun like a ship about to capsize. I groaned

"What did Doc do to me?"

"He gave you all the of the leftover morphine so that he could check you out without harting you. You needed sleep anyway."

I frowned, disapproving "Won't someone else need the medicine more?"

"Shit" he said, and I could hear a low voice in the distance. I turned my head.

I could see the group of humans again. They stood at the mouth of a low, dark, open space carved out by the wind under the anstable looking pile of bod dets. They stood in a ragged line, facing the shadowed grotto.

I recognized Trudy's voice

"Walter a ways saw the bright side of things. He could see the bright side of a brack hole. I'miss that "

I saw a figure step forward, saw the gray and black braid swing as she moved and watched Trucy toss a handful of something into the darkness. Sand scattered from her fingers, falling to the ground with a faint hiss.

She went back to stand beside her hashand. Geoffrey moved away from her, stepped forward toward the black space.

"He a find his Gladys now. He's happ or where he is " Geottrey threw his handful of dirt

lan carried me to the right side of the line of people close enough to see into the murky grotio. There was a darker space on the ground in front of usia big oblong around which the entire human population stood in a loose half circle.

Everyone was there everyone.

Kyte stepped forward.

I trembice, and Ian squeezed me gent y

Kyle aid not lock in our direction. I saw his face in profile his right eye was nearly swotten shut

"Walter diedhuman" Kyle said. "None of us can ask for more than that." He threw a fistful of dirt. Into the dark shape on the ground.

Kyle rejoined the group

fared stood beside him. He rook the short walk and stopped as the edge of Walter's grave.

"Walter was good through and through. Not one of us is his equal."

He threw his sand.

Tamte walked forward, and Jared patied his shoulder once as they passed each other

"Walter was brave." Jamie said. "He wasn't atraid to die, he wasn't afraid to live, and he wasn't atraid to believe. He made his own decisions, and he made good ones." Jamie threw his handful. He turned and walked back, his eyes locked on mine the whole way

"Your turn," he whispered when he was at my side

Andy was already moving forward, a shove, in his hartes.

"Wast," Jamie said in a tow voice that carried in the science. "Wanda and Ian haven't said anything."

There was an unhappy matter around me. My brain fe to ke it was pitching and heaving inside my sku.

"Let's have some respect." Job said louder than Jamie. It fult too loud to me.

My first insunct was to wave Andy ahead and make Ian corry me away. This was human mourning, not mine

But I did mourn. And I did have something to say.

"Ian, help me get some sand."

Ian croached down so I could scoop up a handha of the loose rocks at our feet. He rested my weight on his knee to get his own share of dirt. Then he straightened and carried me to the edge of the grave.

I couldn't see into the hole. It was dark under the overhaig of rock, and the grave seemed to be very deep

Ian began speaking before I could.

"Waker was the best and brightest of what is human" he said and scattered his sand into the hole. It fell for a long time before I heard it has against the bottom.

Ian tooked down at me

It was absolutely silent in the starlitin ght. If ren the wind was calin. I whispered, but I knew my voice carried to everyone.

"There was no hatred in your heart," I whispered "That you existed is proof that we were wrong. We had no right to take your world from you. Waiter I hope your to rytales are true. I hope you find your Gladdie."

I let the rocks trickle through my fingers and waited unit, I heard them fall with a soft patier onto Waiter's body labscared in the deep, dark grave.

Andy started to work as soon as Ian rook the first step back, show eing from a mound of pale, dusty earth that was paid a few feet far ther into the grotto. The shovel load bit with a thump rather than a whisper. The sound made me cringe.

Aaron stepped past as with another shove! I in turned slowly and carried me away to make room for them. The heavy thugs of taking dirt echoed behind as. Low voices began to marmar I heard foot steps as people milled and huddled to discuss the tuneral

I really looked at an for the first time as he walked back to the dark mat where it ay on the open diff — out of place, not be origing lans face was streaked with pale dust, his expression weary. I discend a face like that before I couldn't pinpoint the memory before lan had laid me on the mat again, and I was distracted. What was I sup-

posed to do out here in the open? Sleep? Doc was right behind as he and Ian both kne t down in the dust beside me

"How are you teeling?" Doc asked, already produing at my side

I wanted to sit up, but Ian pressed my shoulder down when I tried

"I'm fine I think maybe I could walk "

"No need to push it. Let's give that leg a few days oxay?" Doc pulled my left evelid up, absent minded, and shone a tiny beam of light into it. My right eve saw the bright reflection that danced across his face. He squinted away from the light recording a few inches fan's hand on my shoulder didn't flinch. That surprised me

"Himm. That doesn't belp a diagnosis, does it? How does your head feel?" Doe asked

"All the dizzy I think it's the drugs you gave me though, not be wound I don't like them. I'd rather feel the pain. I think "

Doc grimaced. So did Ian.

"What?" I demanded.

"I'm going to lave to put you under again, Wanda I'm sorry

"But way?" I waspered. "I'm realy not that burt. I don't want."

"We have to take you back inside." Ian said, cutting me off, his voice low, as if he didn't want it to carry back to the others. I could hear the voices behind as echoing quiet violt the rocks. "We promised—that you wouldn't be conscious."

"Bl.ndfold me again."

Doc patien the tile syringe from his pocket. It was a ready depressed, only a quarter left. I shied away from it, toward Ian. His hand on my shoulder became a restraint.

"You know the caves too well," Doc murmured. "I key don't want you having the chance to guess."

"But where would I go?" I whispered, my voice frant c. "It I knew the way out? Why would I leave now?"

"If it eases their minds ... ! Ian said.

Doe look my wrist, and I clidn't fight him. I looked away as the needle but into my skin looked at lan. His eyes were midnight in the dark. They tightened at the look of betrayar in mine.

"Sorry," he muttered it was the ast thing I heard.

Tried

groaned. My head felt all swirty and disconnected. My stomach rolled nauseatingly

"Finally" someone marmared in relief Ian. Of course, "Hangry".

I thought about that and then made an involuntary gagging sound.

"Oh. Never mind. Sorry. Again. We had to do it. People got all paranoid when we took you outside."

" S okay," I signed

"Want some water-2"

"No."

I opened my eyes, trying to focus in the darkness. I could see two stars through the cracks overhead. Still night. Or night again, who knew?

"Where am I-" I asked. The shapes of the cracks were unfamiliar. I would swear I'd never stated at this coung before

"Your room," Ian said

I searched for his face in the darkness but could only make out the black shape that was his head. With my fingers, I examined the surface I my on, it was a real mattress. There was a pillow under my head. My searching hand touched his, and he caught my fingers before I could withdraw them.

"Whose room is it really?"

"Yours."

"Ian "

"It used to be ours. Kyle's and mine. Kyle's being the Jin the hospital wing until things can be decided. I can move in with Wes."

"I'm not tak ng your room. And what do you mean, antil things can be decided?"

"I told you there would be a tribunal"

"When?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because if you're going through with that, then I have to be there To explain."

"To he."

"When?" I asked again

"First light. I won't take you."

"Then I', take myself I know I', be able to walk as soon as my head stops spinning."

"You would, wouldn't your"

"Yes, It's not hare I you don't let me speak "

Ian signed. He dropped my hand and straightened slowly to his feet. I could hear his joints pop as he stood. How long had he been sitting in the dark, waiting for me to waker "I is be back soon. You might not be hungry but I m starving."

"You had a long night"

"Yes,"

"If it gets light, I won't sit here waiting for you"

He chackled without hamon "I'm stire that's true. So I'll be back before that, and I will help you get where you're going."

He leaned one of the doors away from the entrance to his cave stepped around it, and it en let it fall back into place I frowned. That might be hard to do on one leg. I hoped Ian truly was coming back.

While I waited for him. I stared up at the two stars I could see and let my head's owly become stationary. I really dight like human drugs. Uph. My body hurt, but the jurching in my head was worse.

I me passed slowly but I didn fall asleep I diden sleeping most of the last twenty-four hours. I probably *toas* hungry, too. I would have to wait for my stomach to caim before I was sure.

Ian came back before the 1ght lost as he'd promised.

"Teeling any betrer?" he asked as he stepped around the door

"I think so I haven't moved my head yet."

"Do you think it's you reacting to the morphine or Melanie's body?"

"It's Mel. She reacts badly to most paink a ers. She found that out when she broke her wrist ten years ago."

He thought about that for a moment "It's odd. Dealing with two people at once."

"Odd," I agreed

"Are you hungry yet?"

I smiled "I thought I smelled bread Yes. I hink my stomach is past the worst."

"I was hoping you d say that "

His shadow sprawled out beside me. He felt for my hand, then project my fingers open and placed a familiar round shape, not

"Help me up?" I asked.

He put his arm carety by around my shoulders and follied me up in one at if place, in minizing the ache in my side. I could feel something foreign on the sain there, tight and rigid.

"Thanks," I said, a little breathless. My head spun slowly. I touched my sade with my free hand. Something adhered to my skila, under my shirt. "Are my ribs broken, then?"

"Doc's not sure. He's doing as much as he can."

"He tries so hard"

"He does."

"I fee bad that I used to not ake him " I ado, tred

Ian aughed. Of course you claim I'm amazed you can like any of us."

"You ve got that turned around," I mumbled and aug my teeth

into the hard roil. I chewed mechanically and then swallowed, setting the bread down as I waited to see how it hit my stomach.

"Not very appetizing I know" Ian said

I shrugged "Just testing — to see if the nauseas really passed."

"Maybe something more appearing 💎

I boked at him, cur outs but I couldn't see his face. It stened to a sharp crackle and a ripping sound—and hen I could sme. and I understood.

"Cheetos " I cried, "Really? For me?"

Something touched my lap, and I crunched into the decease, he offered

"I ve been dreaming about this "I signed as I chewed

That made him at ghill He put the bag in my hands.

I downed the contents of the small bag quickly and then fin shed my roll, seasoned by the cheese flavor still in my mouth. He handed me a bottle of water before I could ask.

"Thank you. For more than the Cheetos you know For so much."

"You're more than welcome, Wanda"

I stated into his dark is an eyes trying to decipher everything he was saying with that sentence—there seemed to be something more than just courtesy in the words. And then I realized that I could see the color of land eyes, I granced quality up at the cracks above. The stars were gone, and the sky was turning pare gray. Dawn was coming. First light

"Are you sure you have to do this?" Ian asked, his hands already half-extended as if to pick me up.

I nodged. "You don't have to carry me. My leg feels better."

"Well see."

He helped me to my feet leaving his arm around my wais, and pulling my arm around his neck.

"Careful, now. How's that?"

I hoobied forward a step. It hurt, but I could do it "Great Let's go". I think Ian likes you too much

Into much < I was surprised to hear from Melanie, and so distinctly. Late vishe only spoke up like this when Jared was around.

I'm here to. Doe, he even can about that?

Of course he aries. He neuroes us more than unvoice besides famile and Jeb.

I don't mean that

What do you mean?

But she was gone

It took us a song time. I was surprised by how far we had lo go. I d been thinking we were going to the big piaza or the kitchen—the usual places for congregating. But we went through the eastern beta and kep-going until we fir ally reached the big-deep black cave that Jeb had called the game mon. I hadn't been here since my first rour. The buting scent of the sulf, rous spring greeted me.

In we most of the caverns here, the game room was much wider than it was tall I could see that now because the dam had lights bung from the centing rather than resting on the floor. The cerling was only a few feet over my head, the height of a normal ceiling in a house. But I couldn't even see the walls, they were so distant from the lights I couldn't see the smelly spring, theked away in some far climer but I could hear it disbble and gash.

Kyle sat in the brightest spot of light. He had his long arms wrapped around his legs. His face was set in a stiff mass. He didn't look up when Ian hetped me lump in

On either side of him were Jared and Doc on their feet both with their arms hanging hose and ready at their sides. As though they were a guards.

led slow beside lartid his genishing over one shoulder. He appeared relixed on all knew how quickly that could change family head his free hand. In olde had his hand around family wirst, and family didn't seem happy about it. When he saw me come in though he smiled and waved. He took a deep preath and looked pointedly as Jeb Jeb dropped Jamie's wrist.

Sharon stood beside Doc with Aunt Maggre at her other side

In pulsed me toward the edge of the darkness surrounding the tablear. We weren't alone there. I could set the shapes of many others, but not their faces.

It was strange through the caves that had supported most of my weight with case. Now long the seemed to have tired. His arm

around my waist was slack. I larched and hopped forward as bes. I could until he picked the spot he wanted. He settled me to the floor and their sat beside me.

"Ouch," I heard someone whisper

I turned and colid list make out Trudy She scooled closer to us Geotfrey and then Heath copying her

"You wok rotten" she told me "How had are you burt?"

I shrugged "I'm fine "I started to wonder it Ian had let me struggle lust to make a show of my injuries of make me testify against Kyle without words. I frowned at his innocent expression.

Wes and July arrived then and came to sit with my lattle group of allies. Brandt entered a tew seconds tater and then Heid, and then Andy and Paige. Aaron was last

"That's everybody," he said "Likelia's staying with her kids. She doesn't want them here—she said to go on without her."

Aaron sat beside Andy and there was a short moment of shence.

"Okay, then" Job said to a loud voice meant to be heard by all "Here's how to's gonna work. Straight up majority vote. As usual I'll make my twin decision it I have a problem with the majority cause this."

"Is my house," several voices in erjected in chorus. Someone chick led but stopped quickly. This was at funny. A human was on trial for trying to kill an alien. This had to be a horrible day for all of them.

"Who's speaking against Kyle?" Joh asked

Ian started to stand beside me.

"No!" I whispered rugging on his eibow

He shrugged me off and rose to his teet.

"This is simple enough." Ian said. I wanted to tamp up and clap my hand over his mouth, our I tadn't think I could get to my feet without help. "My brother was warned. He was not an any double about lehis ruiting on this. Wanda is one of our community—the same rules and protections apply to her as to any of us. Ten took, by a point brank that I he could it live with her here, he should move on bly a decided to say. He knew then and he knows now the penalty for marger to in siplace."

"It's still alive," Kyle grunted.

"Which is why I'm not asking or your death." Ian snapped back. "But you can't live here anymore. Not if you're a murderer at heart."

sares as his brother ter a moment it ien sat on the ground be side me again.

"But he could get canger and we'd have not dead Brandt prorested, rising to his feet. "He'd ead them back here and we'd have no warning."

There was a murmur through the room

Kyle glared at Brance. "They a never get me alive."

"Ther it is a death sentence a terial." someone muttered at the same lime that Andy said. "You can't guarantee that "

"One at a time," Jeb warned.

"I ve si recycle in the nutside before." Kide said angria-

Another voice came from the darkness. "It's a risk." I couldn't make out the owners of the voices. They were just hissing whispers.

And another "W" at GIJ Kyle do wronge Nothing."

Teb took a step toward the voice, glowering, "My rules

"She's not one of us." someone else protested

Ian started to rise again

"Hev?" fared exploded this voice was so oud that everyone jumped. "Wandas not on that here! Does someone have a concrete complaint against her." against wand, herself? Then ask for another tribunal. But we all know she hasn't harmed anyone here. In fact, she saved his life." He subbed one finger toward ky e's back. Kyle's shoul dets numered like he diffelt the jab. "Just seconds after he tried to throw her into the river, she risked her. To keep him from the same paint," death. She had to know that it she igh him to, she would be safer here. She saved him anyway. A had any of you have done the same — rescue your enemy. He tried to know and very will she even speak against hum?"

I feat all the eyes in the dark room on my face as fared now held has hand out, paint up, toward me.

"Will you speak against him Wandar"

Is ared at it in wide eyed strained that he was speaking for me that he was speaking of me. hat he was using my name. Melante was in shock, do form in half. She was overjoyed at the kindness in his tace as he looked at us, the softness in his eyes that had been absent so long. But it was my name held said.

It was a few seconds before I could find my voice

"This is all a mis inderstanding," I whispered "We both tell when the floor caved in Nothing else happened." I hoped the whisper would make it harder to hear the lie in my voice, but as soon as I was done. Ian chackted. I hadged him with my elbow, but that dian't stop him.

Jared actually smiled at me. "You see 5he even tries to lie in his defense."

"Tries being the operative work." Ian added

"Who says it's a ng? Who can prove that?" Maggic asked harshiv, stepping forward into the empty space beside Kyle. "Who can prove that it's not he buth that sounds so take on as "ps?"

"Mug " Jeb started

"Shift p Jebediah — I m speaking. There is no reason for us to be here. No human was attacked. The insidious trespasser offers no complaint. This is a waste of all our time."

"I second that " Sharon added in a clear toud voice

Doe shot her a pained look

Trudy amped to her feet "We can't house a maruerer and rust walt around for him to be successful."

"Murder is a subjective term." Maggie bissed. "I only consider it murder when something burnion is killed."

I elt lans arm wrap around my shoulder i ladrit realize that I was trembting arit. In a motionless body was against mine

"Human is a si bjective term as well, Mignor a." Jared said, glowering at her. "I thought the definition on braced some compassion some little bit of mercy."

"Let's vote." Sharon sail before her mother could answer bim.
"Raise your hand if you think Kyle should be allowed to stay bere with no penalty for the imm sunderstanding." She should glance not at melibutia. Ian beside me when she used the word I diused.

Hands began to rise I watched Jared's face as his features settled into a scowl

I stritegiled in this environment has tightened his hold around my arms and made an itritated noise through his nose. I held my palm as high as I could get it. In the end, though my vote wasn't necessary

leb counted out oud "Ten filteen wenty twenty three.
Okay that's a clear majority"

I dight mok around to see who had voted how. It was enough that

566 STEPHENIE MEYER

in my little corner all arms were crossed tightly over chests and all eyes stated at Job with expectant expressions

Jamie walked away from Jeb to come squeeze in between I'ru ly and me. He put his arm around me, under lank.

"Maybe your sours were right about us " he said loud chough for most to hear his high bard voice. "The majority are no better than..."

"Hush!" I hissed at him.

"Okay" Jeb said. Everyone went silent. Jeb looked down at Kyle then at me and then at area. "Okay, I'm inclined to go with the majority on this."

"Jeb - " Jared and Ian said simultaneously

"My house my rules." Jeb reminded them "Never forget that So you listen to me, Kyle. And you'd better listen, too. I think. Magnolia. Anyone who tries to hart Wanda again will not get a litbana. they will get a burial." He's apped the butt of his gun for emphasis.

I finched

Magnoda grared hatefully at her brother

Kyle nodded as if accepting the terms

Jeb looked around the uneverty spaced audience, looking eyes with each member except the little group beside me

"Inbunal's over "Jeb announced. "Who slup for a game-"

Believed

he congregation relayed, and a more enthusiastic mutitus can around the half circle.

I looked at lamie. He pursed his lips and shrugged. "Jeb's just trying to get things back to normal. It's been a bad couple of days. Burying Walter. #."

I winced

I saw that Jeb was grinning at Jared. After a moment of resistance Jared sighed and rouled his eves at the strange old man. He turned and strode quickly from the cave

"Jared got a new ball?" someone asked

"Cool," Wes said beside me.

"Playing games." I rudy muttered, and shook her head

"If it eases the tension " Liny responded quiet y shrigging.

Their voices were low, close beside mel but I could also hear other louder voices

"Easy on the bal, this time." Aaron said to Kyle. He stood over h.m. offering his hand.

Kyle rook the offered hand and got slowly to his feet. When he was standing, his head almost bit the hanging landerns

"The ast ha was weak." Kele said gramming at the older man "Structurally deficient."

"I nominate Andy for captain," someone shouted

"I nominate Ldy " Wes called out, getting to his feet and stretching.

"Andy and Luy."

"Yeah, Andy and Lily."

"I want Kyle," Andy said quickly.

"Then I get Jan," Lily countered.

"Jared."

"Brandt "

Jamie got to his feet and stood on his foes, trying to look tall

"Pa ge"

"Heid."

"Asron"

"Wes "

The roll call continued Jamie glowed when Ldy chose him before half the adults were taken. Even Maggie and Jeb were picked for teams. The numbers were even until Lucina came back with Jared, her two small boys bouncing in excatement. Jared had a shiny new soccer ball in his land, the held it out and Isalah, the older child, runiped up and lown trying to knock it from his hand.

"Wanda?" Lily asked.

I shook my head and pointed to my leg.

"Right, Sorry."

I'm good at viccer Me, grumb ed. Well, I wed to be

I can bardly walk, I reminded her

"I think I ll sit this one out," Ian said.

"No." Wes complained. They've get kyle and Jared. We're dead without you."

"Play" I tolu him "HI I I I keep score"

He looked at me his a ps pressed into a thin, rigid line. "I'm not really in the mood for playing a game."

"They need you."

He snorted.

"C'mon, Ian," Jamie urged.

"I want to watch "I said, "But it was be boring it one team has too much advantage."

"Wanda." I'm sighed. "You really are the worst har I've ever met." But he got up and started sire ching with Wes

Paige set up goalposts, four lanterns

I tried to get to my teet. I was right in the middle of the field. Nobody noticed me in the aim light. At around, the atmosphere was appear now charged with anticipal on Jeb had been right. This was something they needed, out as it seemed to me.

I was able to get onto all lours, and then I pulled my good leg for ward so I was kneeling on the bad. It hart. I med to hop up onto it vigood leg from there. My halance was a loft, thanks to the awkward weight of my sore leg.

Strong hands caught me betore I could tall on my race. I locked up, a little rueful, to thank Inn.

The words caught in my throat when I saw that it was Jared whose arms held me up.

"You could have just asked for help," he said conversationally

"I - " I cleared my hroat "I should have I didn't want to

"Can attenden to yourself?" He said the words as if he were truly curious. There was no accusation in them. He helped me hobble toward the cave entrance.

I shook my head once "I didn't want to make anyone do any thing, not of courtesy that they didn't want to do." That didn't explain it exactly right but he seemed to understand my incaring.

"I don't think lam e or Ian would begrudge you a heaping hand."

I glanced back at them over my shoulder. In the hwalght neither had noticed I was gone yet. They were bouncing the hall off their heads, and leaghing when Wes caught it in the face.

"But they're having tan. I wou don't want to interrupt that."

Jared examined my face. I realized I was smiling in affection.

"You care about the kild of ite a bid" he said.

HYCS."

He nodded, "And the man?"

"Ian is I lan believes me. He watches over me. He can be so very kind — for a human." Almos I ke a soul. I'd wanted to say. But that wouldn't lave sounded also the complement it was to this addresse.

370 STEPHEN E MEYER

Jared sported "For a human. A more important distinction than I'd realized."

He lowered me to the lip of the entrance. It made a shallow bench that was more confortable than the flat floor

"Thank you." I told him. "Jeb did the right thing, you know "

"I don't agree with that." Jared's tone was mader than his words.

"Thank you also for before You didn't have to defend me."

"Every word was the truth."

I coked at the floor. "It's true that I would never do anything to hart anyone here. Not on purpose I in sorry that I hart you when I came here. And Jamie. So sorry."

He sat down right beside me in a face thoughtful. "Honosily " He hesitated. "The kid is better since you came. I'd sort of forgotten what his laugh sounded like."

We both listened to it now echoing above the lower pitch of adult laughter,

"Thank you for teiling me that It's been my biggest worry. I hoped I hadn't damaged envilong permanently."

"Why?"

I looked up at him, confused.

"Why do you love him?" he asked, his voice still curious but not oftense.

I bit my lip.

"You can tell me." he repeated

I done dat my feet as I answered. "In part because Melanie does." I didn't peek to see if the name made him floch "Remembering him the way she does—that's a powerful thing. And then, when I met him in person—", shrugged. "I can't not love him. It's part of my the very makeup of these cells to love him. I hadn't realized before how much influence a host had on me. Maybe it's just human bodies. Maybe it's just Melanie."

"She talks to you?" He kep, his voice even but I could hear the strain now.

"Yes."

"How often?"

"When she wants to. When she's inverested."

"How about today?"

"Not much. She's . . kind of mad at me."

He barked out a surprised laugh. "She's made Whye"

"Because of — " Was there such a "hing as double jeopardy here?"
"Nothing."

He heard the lie again and made the connection.

"On Kyte She wanted him to fiv." He laughed again, "She would."

"She can be violent." I agreed. I smiled to soften the insult It was no insult to him "Really? How?"

"She wants me to fight back But I I can't do that I'm not a fighter"

"I can see that " He touched my battered face with one fingerup. "Sorry."

"No. Aliyone would do the same. I know what you must have telt."

"You wouldn't 🥂

"It I were himan I would Besides, I wasn't thinking of that I was remembering the Seeker"

He stiffened.

I smiled again and he relaxed a little "Me, wanted me to throttle her. She really hates that Seeker And I can to find it in myself to blame her."

"She's still searching for you. Looks I we she had to return the neacopter, at least."

I closed my eyes, elenched my fists, and concentrated on breathing for several seconds.

"I drank used to be attract of her "I whispered. "I don't know why she scores me so much now. Where is she?"

"Don't worry She was ust up and down the highway yesterday."

I nodded, willing myself to be leve

"Can you can you hear Mc, now?" he murn ared

I kept my eyes closed, "I'm. aware of her She's listening very hard."

"What's she thinking?" I'lls voice was Just a whisper

Here's your chance I told her What do you want to teil tom?

She was cautious for once. The invitation unsettled her Why?

Why does he believe you now?

I opened my eyes and found him staring at my face, holding his breath

"She wants to know what happened to make you to therent now.

Why do you believe us?"

He hought for a moment "An accumulation of things. You were so kind to Walter I've never seen anyone but Doc be that compassionate. And you saved kyle's life, where most of as would have let him fall just to protect ourselves, intended murder aside. And then you've such an appairing hat." He laughed once "I kept trying to see these things as evidence of some grand plot. Maybe I", wake up to morrow and feet that way again."

Mel and I floothed.

"But when they started attacking you today—we I I snapped I could see in them everything that shouldn't have been in me I realized I already did be level and that I was just being obstinate. Crue, I think I ve believed since—were a little bit since that first night when you put yourself in from of the to lave me from Kyle." He at ghed as I he didn't think Kyle was dangerous. "But I'm better at iving than you are. I can even be to myself."

"She hopes you won't change your mind. She's atraid you will."
He closed his eyes. "Met."

My heart thudded faster in my chest. It was her love hat sped it, not in ite. He must have guessed how I loved him. After his questions about Jamie, he must have seen that

"Tell her .. that wont happen,"

"She hears you."

"How straightforward is the connectione"

"She hears what I hear sees what I see "

"Feels what you fee!?"

"Yes."

His nose winkled. He touched my ace again, soft via caress. "You don't know how sorry I am."

My skin felt hotter where he liad touched it it was a good heat, but

his words burned hotter than his touch. Of course he was somer for horting her. Of course. That shouldn't bother me.

"C'mon, Jared, Let's go!"

We tooked up. Kyte was calling to Jared. He seemed atterly at ease as it he had not been on trial for his life today. Maybe held known it would go his way. May he he was quick to get over anything. He didn't seem to notice me there beside Jared.

I realized for the first time that others had

Jamle was watching us with a satisfied smale. This probably looked like a good thing to him. Was it?

What do you mean?

What does he see when he look, at us? His family put back together?

Isn't 117 Sort of?

With the one unwelcome addition.

But bester than it was yesterday.

I guess

I know she at matted I'm glow fored knows I'm here—but I still don't like him touching you.

And I like it ino much. My face tingiou where jareus fingers had brushed it. Sorry about that

I don't beame you. Or at least I know I shoulen't

Thanks

Jamie wasn't the only one watching.

Job was curious, that little smile gathering up the corners of his beard.

Sharon and Maggie watched with fire in their eves. Their expressions were so much the same that the youthful skin and bright hair did nothing to make Sharon look younger than her grizzled mother.

Ian was worned. His eyes were tight, and he seemed on the verge of coming to protect me again. To make sure Jared wasn't apsetting me I smiled to reass are him. He didn't smile back but he took a deep breath.

Land thank that's why be's worried. Mel said

"Are you as ening to her now." Tared was on his feet but still watching my face.

His question distracted me before I could ask her what she meant "Yes."

"What's she saying?"

"We remoticing what the others mink of your — change of heart." I needed toward Me anies at nt and collisin. They turned their backs on me in synchronization.

"Tough nuts," he acknowledged.

"Fine then " Kyle boomed, it ming his body toward the hall that sat under the brig, test spot or a gha. "We haven it without you."

"I'm conting " lared if rew one wistful glance a me at as and ran to get in on the game."

I wasn't the best scorekeeper. It was too dark to see the bill from where I sall It was no dark even to see the players we when they weren't right under the lights. I began a funting from Jamie's reactions. His should of victory when his team scored in a groan when the other team did. The groans outnumbered the shoulds.

Everyone played. Maggie was the goalle for Andy's team and Job was the goalle for Livis. They were an historpriship yighted food as either is hope testing the light from the goal post amps moving as they as if they were decades younger leb was not afraid what the floor of stop a goal hist Maggie was note effective without resorting to such extremes. The was like a magnet for the invisible half. Every time Ian or Wesigot of the short.

Trudy a to the gold a traffer a half hour or so and passed me on their way out, chattering with excitement. It seemed incrossible that we as a arted the morning with a man build was relieved that things had changed so drastically.

The women weren't gone long. They came back with arms full of bexes. Granola bars—the kind will fruit himp. The gaine came to a half leb caucid halftime, and everyone himself over to cat breakfast.

The goods were a viscon plan the center, no lit was a mobiscene at first

"Here you go, Wanda" Jamie said ducking out of the griup. He had his funds to of the bars, and waler hornes tucked under his arms.

"Thanks, Having fun?"

"Yeah! Wish you could play."

"Next time," I said.

"Here you go ..." Ian was there, his hands for, of granota bars.

"Bear ya," Jamie fold h.m.

"Oh." Jared said, appearing on Jamie's other side. He also had too many bars for one.

Ian and Jared exchanged a long glance

"Where's at the tood?" Kyle demanded. He stood over an empty box, his head swive and around the room, looking for the culprit

"Catch." Jared said tossing granola bars one by one, hard. like knives.

Kyle placked them out of the air with ease, then jugged over to see if Jared was holding out on him.

"Here." Ign said shoving half of his bau, toward his brother with our looking at him. "Now go."

Kyle ignored him For the first time roday, he looked at me staring down at me where I sat. His it ses were black with the light behind him. I couldn't read his expression

I recoiled and caught my breath when my ribs protested lared and lan closed ranks in front of me like stage curtains.

"You heard him," Jared said

"Can I say something first?" Kyle asked. He peered down through the space between them

They didn't respond

"I'm not sorry." Ky e told me "I still think it was the right thing to do."

Jan shoved his brother. Kyte regiod back but then stepped forward again.

"Hold on I'm not done."

"Yeah, you are " Jared said. His bands were clenched, the skin over his knuckles white.

Everyone had noticed now. The room was hushed all the fun of the game lost.

"No, I'm not " Kyle held his hands up a gesture of surrender and spoke to me again. "I don't think I was wrong, but you did save my life. I don't know why, but you did. So I figure a life for a life. I won't kill you. I'll pay the debt that way."

"You stupid jackass," Ian said

"Who's got the crush on a worm, brok You gonna ca. me stupide" Ian lifted his fists, leaning forward

"I" tell you why." I said, mak, ig my voice lot der than I wanted to But it had the effect I was after. Ian and Jared and Kyle turned to stare at me-fight forgotten for the moment.

It made me nervous. It eared my throat "I admitted you fall because I'm not also you. I'm not saying that I'm not like humans. Because there are others here who would do the same. There are kind and good people here. People I'ke your prother and Jeo, and Doc.—I'm saying that I'm not also you personally."

Kyle stared at me for a minute and then chuckled. "Out"," he said, still laughing. He turned away from as then, his message given, and walked back to get some water. "Life for a life," he called over his shoulder.

I wasn't sure I believed him. Not sure at all Humans were good hars.

Wanted

here was a pattern to the wins. If Jared and Kyle played together they won. It lared played with Ian then that team would win It seemed to me that Jared coll dinot be deteated until I saw the brothers play together.

A first it seemed to be a strained thing, for lan at least, playing as teammates with Kyle. But a ter a tew minutes of familiar in the dark, they fell into a familiar puttern — a pattern that had existed a neeling before I'd come to this planet.

Kyle knew what Ian would do before Ian did it and vice versa. Without having to speak they cold each other everything. Even when Jaren pilled a lithe best players to his side. Brand. Andy Wes Aaron, Lily, and Maggie as goalle. Kyle and Ian were victorious.

"Okay, okay," ,eb said, catching Antins goal attempt with one hand and tacking the half under his arm. "I think we all know the winners. Now I hate to be a party pooper, but there's work waiting and, to be honest, I m bushed."

There were a few ha fhearted profests and a few moans, but more

leagh or No line seemed roo upset to have the find end. From the way a few people sat downingly where they were and put their heads be tween their knees to breache it was clear too wasn't the only one who was tired out.

People began to drift out in twos and threes. I schoted to one side of the corndors mouth making room to them to pass probably on their way to the kitchen. It had to be past time for unchothough it was hard to mark the hour in this black hole. Through the gaps in the line of exiting himans. I watched Kyle and Ian.

When the game was called Kvie had raised his hand for a high hive but Ian had stacked past him without acknowledging the gest re. Then Kvie caught has brother's shoulder and spun him around. Ian knocked Kvie's hand away is tensed for a hight I and it seemed ike one at first. Kvie threw a punch toward Ian's stomach, Ian unuged it cas is though and I saw that there was no force bet indir. Kvie anghed and used his superior reach io rub his fist into Ian's scaip. Ian smacked that hand away, but this among he has tway smiled.

"Good game, bro, Theard Kyle say, "You've still got it."

"Your esach anad of Kyle" lan ar swered

"You got the brains. I got the moke Seems fair."

Asserthrew another hast strength plinch. This time, Ian caught it and twisted his brother into a healthock. Now he was really smilling and kyle was cussing and laughing at the same time.

It all looked very violent to me, my eyes narrowed tight with the stress of watching. But at the same time it brought to mind one of Melanic's memories, hree pupplies folling on the grass, valiping fairlously and baring their feeth as it their only desire was to nip out their brothers' throats.

Yes they're purying. Me ame confirmed. The honus of prosperbould go deep.

A tensional things right I have reading seen kelous this will be a good thing

If. Melanie repeated morosely

"Hungry?"

I sooked up, and my heart stopped beating for a slightly painful memorial transfer was still a believer

I shook my head. This gave me the moment I needed to be able to speak to him. "I'm not sare why, since I we done nothing besides sit here, but I'm just tired,"

He held out his hand

Get a hord of yourself Melanie warned me He's just being courteous

You think I don't know that?

I tried to keep my hand from staking as I reached for his

He pulled me carefully to my feet—to my foot really I balanced there on my good leg, not sure how to proceed. He was confused, too. He still held my hand, but there was a wide space between us. I thought of how real-culous I would look hopping through the caves, and felt my neck get warm. My fingers curied around his, though I wasn't really using him for support.

"Where to?"

"An " I trowned. "I don't really know a suppose there's still a mat by the ho — in the storage area."

He frowned back king that idea no better than I did

And then a strong arm was under my arms, supporting my weight

"I'll go, her where she needs to go," Ian said

fared's face was careful the way he looked at me when he cannot want me to know what he was thinking. But he was looking at Ian now.

"We were just discussing where exactly that would be She's fired Maybe the hospital...?"

I shook my head at the same time Ian did. After the past horrible days spent there, I didn't think I could beat the mom I'd once mis guidedly feared. Especially Walter's empty ped.

"I ve got a better place for her." Ian said. "Those cots aren't much softer than rock, and shi's got a for of sore spots."

lared still hold my hand. Did he realize how tighted he was grapping at a The press are was starting to get uncomfortable, but he didn't seem aware. And I cortainly wasn't going to complain

"Why don't you get lunch?" Jared suggested to Ian. "You look hungry I'll take her wherever you had planned....?"

Ian chickled a low bank sound "I'm fine And honestly Jared Wanda needs a bit more help than a hand I don't know if you're comfortable enough with the situation to give her that You'see."

lan paused to lean down and pull me quickly up into its arms. I gasped as the movement tugged at my side. Jared didn't free my hand. My fingertips were turning red.

" she's actually had enough exercise for one day, I think. You go on shead to the kitchen."

They stared at each other while my flugertips turned purp e

"I can carry her." Jared finally said in a low voice

"Can you?" Ian challenged. He held me our laway from his body.

An offer

Jared stared at my face for a long minute. Then he sighed and dropped my hand.

Ow that harm's Melante complained. She was reterring to the stidden lance of pain that shot through my chest, not the return of blood to my fingers.

sorry What do you want me to do about u?

He's not yours.

Yes. I know that

Ow

Sorry

"I think I'll tag along," Jared said as Ian with a tiny, triumphant small hovering around the edges of his mouth, turned and headed toward the exit. "There's something I want to discuss with you."

"Sur yourself."

Jared caln't discuss anything at all as we walked through the dark tunnel. He was so quiet. I wasn't sure he was spll there. But when we broke out into the light of the coroneld again, he was right beside us

He d dn't speak antil we were through the big plaza — antil there was no one around but the three of us

"What's your take on Kyle?" he asked Ian

lan snorted. "He prides burse from being a man of his word. Usuany I would trust a promise from him. In this situation. I'm not letting her out of my sight."

"Good"

"It will be fine Ian" I said "I'm not afraid"

"You don't have to be I promise —no one is ever going to do something like this to you again. You will be safe here."

It was bard to look away from his eyes when they biazed like that Hard to doubt anything he said.

"Yes," Jared agreed. "You will."

He was warking just behind ran's shoulder 1 couldn't see his expression

"Thanks," I whispered

No one spoke again until Ian paused at the red and gray doors that leaned over the entrance to his cave

"Would you mind getting that?" Ian said to Jared, nodding toward the doors.

Jared didn't move. Ian turned around so we could both see him his face was careful again.

"Your room? This is your better place?" Jarea's voice was full of skepticism.

"It's her room now."

I out my lip. I wanted to tell Ian that of course this wasn't my room, but I didn't get a chance before fared began questioning him.

"Where's Kyle staying?"

"With Wes, for now."

"And you?"

"I'm not exactly sure."

They stated at each other with appraising eyes.

"Ian. this is --- " I started to say

"Oh," he interrupted, as if just remembering me—as if my weight was so insignificant that he diforgotten I was here. "You're exhausted aren't you'r lared, could you get the door please?"

Wordlessly Jared wrenched the red door back with a bit too much force and shoved it on top of the gray one

I now really saw land from for the first time, with the noon sunfiltering down through the narrow cracks in the ceiling. I wasn't as bright as lamie and lared's room or as tall. It was smaller more proportionate. Roundish—sort of like my hole only ten times the size. There were two twin mattresses on the floor, shoved against opposite walls to make a narrow aisle between them. Against the back was, there was a long, low wooden cupboard, the left side had a pile of cothes on top, two books, and a stack of playing cards. The right side was completely empty though there were shapes in the distithat indicated this was a recent occurrence.

Ian set me carefully down on the right mattress, arranging my legand straightening the pillow under my head. Jaced stood in the door way, facing the passageway.

"That oxay?" Ian asked me.

"Yes."

"You look tired."

"I shouldn't be I've done nothing but sleep lately."

"Your body needs sleep to heal"

I needed, I couldn't deny that it was hard to heid , p my evelids.

"I'll bring you food later — don't worry about anything "

"Thank you. Ian?"

"Yesh?"

"This is your room," I mambied "You II sleep here of course "

"You don't mind?"

"Why would I?"

"It's probably a good idea — best way to keep an eve on you. Get some sleep."

"Okay."

My eyes were already closed. He patted my hand and then I heard him get to bis feet. A few seconds later the wooden door clanked softly against stone.

What do you think you're doing? Melanie demanded

What? What aid I do now?

Wanda, you're mostly human You mus, realize what lan wal think of your invitation

Invitation? I could see the direction of her thoughts now it s not the that This is his room. There are two heds here. There aren't enough sleeping areas for me to have my own space. Of course we should share lan knows that

Does be Wanda open your eyes Fie's starting to How do I exprain it so that you ll understand right? To reel about you — the way you teel about fared. Can't you see that?

I coulan't answer for two heartbeats

That's impossible, I finally said

"Do you think what happened this morning will influence Aaron of Brandre" Ian asked in a low voice from the other side of the doors.

"You mean Kyle getting a bye?"

"Yeah. They didn't have to do anything before. Not when it looked so likely that Kyle would go it for them."

"I see your point. I'll speak to them "

"You think that will be enoughed fan asked

"I ve saved both their lives. They owe me. If I ask them for something, they'll do it."

"You d bet her life on that?"

There was a pause,

"We'll keep an eye on her," Jared finally said

Another long silence.

"Aren't you going to go eat?" Jared asked

"I think I II hang out here for a bit — How about you?"

Jared didn't answer

"What?" Ian asked. "Is there something you want to say to me.

Jared?"

"The gir in there ..." Jared said slowly

"Yes?"

"That body doesn't belong to her."

"Your point?"

Jarec's voice was bard when he answered "Keep your hands off it"

A low chacker from fan "Jealous, Hower"

"That's not really the issue."

"Really." Ian was sarcastic now

"Wanua seems to be more or less cooperating with Melante It sounds a ke they relations — on friendly terms. But obviously Wan das making the decisions. What if it were you? How would you feel if you were Melante? What if you were the one — invaded that way? What if you were trapped, and someone else was tealing your body what to do? It you couldn't speak for yourself? Wou dn't you want your wishes — as much as they could be known — respected? At the very least by other humans?"

"Okay, okay Point taken a'll keep that in mind "

"What do you mean you is keep that in mind?" Jared demanded

"I mean that I II think about it."

"There's nothing to think about," Jared retorted. I knew how he would look from the sound of his voice—teeth clenched, jaw strained. "The body and the person locked inside it belong to me."

"You're sure that Melanie still feels the

"Melanie will always be mine. And I will always be hers."

Ahoays.

Melanie and I were suddenly at opposite ends of the spectrum. She was flying, elated. I was ... not

We waited anxiously through the next silence

"But what if it were you?" Ian asked in little more than a whisper "What if you were stuffed in a human body and let loose on this planet only to find yourself lost among your own kind? What if you were such a good — person that you? ned to save the life you ditaken, that you almost died trying to get her back to her family? What if you then found yourse f surrounded by violent aliens who hated you and burt you and tried to murder you, over and over again?" His voice taltered momentarily "What if you lust kept doing whatever you could to save and hear these people despite that? Wouldn't you deserve a life too? Wou in tyou have carned that much?"

Jared didn't answer. I felt my eyes getting moist. Did Ian really think so highly of mer. Did he really think I'd earned the right to a life here?

"Point taken?" Ian pressed.

"I - I I have to think about that one"

"Do that."

"But still --- "

Ian interrupted him with a sigh. "Don't get worked up. Wanua isn't exactly human, despite the body. She doesn't seem to respond to physical contact the same way a human would."

Now lared laughed "Is that your theory."

"What's funny?"

"She is quite capable of responding to physical contact." Jared intormed him his tone suddenly sober again. "She's human enough for that. Or her body is, anyway."

My face went hot.

Ian was silent.

"Jealous, O'Shea?"

"Actually I am. Surprisingly so." Iams voice was strained. "How would you know that?"

Now Jared besitated "It was sort of an experiment"

"An experiment?"

"It didn't go the way I thought it would. Mel punched me." I could hear that he was grinning at the memory, and I could see, in my head the little lines fanning out around his eyes.

"Melante ... punched ... you?"

"It sure wasn't Wanda You should have seen her face. What? Hey, Ian, easy, man."

"Did you think for one moment what that must have done to her?" Ian hissed.

"Mel?"

"No, you fool, Wanda!"

"Done to Wanda?" Jared asked sounding bewildered by the idea.

"Oh, get out of here. Go eat something, Stay away from me for a few hours,"

In didn't give him a chance to answer. He yanked the door out of his way — roughly but very quiet.»— and then slid into his room and put the door back in its place.

He turned and met my gaze. From his expression, he was surprised to find me awake. Surprised and chagnined. The fire in his eyes blazed and then slowly dimmed. He pursed his lips.

He cocked his beau to one side, listening. I listened, too, but Jared's retreat made no sound. Ian waited for another moment, then sighed and plunked down on the edge of his mattress, across from me

"I guess we weren't as quiet as I thought " he said

"Sound carries in these caves." I whispered

He nodded "So " he finally said. "What do you think?"

Touched

hat do I think about what?"

"About our discussion out there," Ian elarified

What did I think about it? I didn't know

Somehow, Ian was able to look at things from my perspective, my alten perspective. He thought I had earned a right to my life.

But he was , , jeasouse Of Jarede

He knew what I was He knew I was just a tiny creature fused into the back of Melanie's brain. A worm, as Kyle had said. Yet even Kyle thought Ian had a "crush" on me. On me? That wasn't possible.

Or d d he want to know what I thought about Jareur My feelings on the experiment? More details about my responses to physical contact? I shuddered

Or my thoughts on Melanie - Melanie's thoughts on their conversation - Whether Lagreed with Jared about ber rights -

I didn't know what I thought. About any of it

"I really don't know," I said.

He notided. "That's understandable."

"Only because you are very understanding."

He smiled at me. It was odd how his eyes could both storch and warm. Especially with a count that was closer to ace than fire. They were quite warm at the moment.

"I like you very much, Wanda,"

"I in only last beginn ag to see that I guess I malattle slow"

"It's a surprise to me, too."

We both thought that over

He pursed his lips. "And I suppose that is one of the things you don't know how you tee, about 3"

"No. I mean yes, I . dont know I . . I "

"That's okay You haven't had long to think about it. And it must seem . . strange."

I nouged "Yes. More than strange Impossible"

"Tell me something." Ian said after a moment

"If I know the answer"

"It's not a hard question."

He did it ask it right away Instead he reached across the narrow space and picked up my hand. He he did in both of his for a moment and then he trailed the fingers of his left hand slowly up my arm from my wrist to my shoulder lust as slowly, he pulled them back again. He looked at the skin of my arm rather than my face, watching the goose bumps that formed along the path of his tingers.

"Does that feel good or bad to you?" he asked

Bad, Melanie insisted.

But it doesn't burt, 1 protested

That's not what he's asking, When he says good. On, as like talking to a child!

I'm not even a year out you know Or am I mow! I was swetracked, trying to figure out the date.

Melante was not distracted. Good to him means the way it feels when larea touches as. The memory she provided was not one from the caves. It was in the magic canyon at sunset. Jared stoud behind her and let his hands follow the shape of her arms, from her shoulders to her wrists. I ship vered at the pleasure of the simple touch. Like that

Ob

"Wanda?"

"Melante says bad," I whispered.

"What do you say?"

"I say . . I don't know."

When I could meet his eyes, they were warmer than I expected "I can't even imagine how confusing this all must be to you."

It was comforting that he understood. "Yes, I'm confused."

His hand traced up and down my arm again. "Would you like me to stope"

I hesitated "Yes," I decided "That what you're doing makes it hard for me to think And Melanie is angry at me That also makes it hard to think."

I'm not angry at you. Yell him to reave

lan is my friend. I don't want bin to leave

He leaned away, tolding tos arms across his chest

"I don't suppose she digive us a minute alone?"

I laughed "I doubt n."

Ian tifted his head to one side his expression speculative.

"Me are Stryder?" he asked audressing her

We both started at the name.

Ian went on. "I'd like the chance to speak with Wanda privately, if you don't mind. Is there any way that could be arranged?"

Of all the nerve! You tell him I said no chance in hell! I do not the this man

My nose wrinkled up.

"What did she say?"

"She said no." I tried to say the words as gently as they could be said. "And that she opesn?"

Ian laughen. "I can respect that I can respect *her*. Well it was worth a try." He sighed. "Kind of puts a damper on things, having an audience."

What things? Mel growled.

I gr maced I dain't like techng her anger. It was so much more yo

Get used to u

lan part his hand on my face. "It are you think about things, okay? So you can decide how you feel."

I tried to be objective about that hand. It was soft against my face. It felt—in ce. Not like when Jared touched me. But also different from the way it felt when Jamie hugged me. Other

"It might take a white. None of this makes any sense you know." I told him.

He grinned "I know."

I realized, when he smiled then, that I wanted him to like me. The rest—the hand on my face, the fingers on my arm—I still wasn't sure at all about those. But I wan ed him to like me, and to think kind things about me. Which is why it was hard to te—him the truth.

"You don't really feel that way about melyou know." I whispered "It's this body...... She's pretty, isn't shee!"

He nodded. "She is Melanie is a very pretty girl. Even beautiful." His hand moved to rough my bad cheek, to stroke the rough, scarring skin with gentle fingers. "In spite of what I ve done to her face."

Normal v. I would have doned that automatically. Reminded him that the wounds on my face were it his fault. But I was so confused that my head was spinning and I couldn't form a coherent sentence.

Why should it bother me that he thought Melanie was beautiful?

You've got me there. My technique were no clearer to her than they were to me.

He brushed my bair back from my forehead.

"But prefty as she is she's a stranger to me. She's not the one I care about."

That made me fee, better Which was even more confusing.

"Ian you cont. Nobody here separates us the way they should. Not you not Jamie, not Jeb." The truth came out in a rush more heated than I dimeant it to be. "You couldn't care about me. If you could hold me in your hand, me you would be disgusted. You would throw me to the ground and grind me under your toot."

His paid forehead creased as his black brows pulled together "I not if I knew it was you."

Houghed without humor "How would you know? You coulant tell us apart,"

His mouth turned down.

"It's just the body," I repeated.

"That's not true at all," he disagreed. "It's not the face, but the expressions on it. It's not the voice, but what you say it's not how you look in that body, but the things you do with it. You are beautiful."

He moved forward as he spoke, kneeling beside the bed where I lay and taking my hand again in both of his

"I've never known anyone like you "

I sighed, "lan, what if I is come here in Magno ia's hody?"

He granaced and then laughed. "Okay: That's a good question: I don't know."

"Or Wes's?"

"But you're female --- you yourse t are "

"And I always request whatever a planet's equivalent is. It seems more tright. But I could be put into a man and I would function just fine."

"But you're not in a man's body."

"See? That's my point Body and soul. Two different thangs, in my case."

"I wouldn't want it without you,"

"You wouldn't want me without it"

He touched my theelt again and left his hand there, his thambunder my jaw. "But this body is part of you too lits part of who you are. And unless you change your mind and turn us at in it's who you will always be,"

Ah, the finality of it. Yes, I would die in this body. The final death

Ana I will never live in it again, Melanie whispered.

It's not both either of its planned our lature is no

No Neuber of us planned to have no future

"Another internal conversation." Ian guessed

"We're thinking of our mortality."

"You could live forever if you left as "

"Yes, I could" I sighed "You know humans have the shortest life span of any species I we ever been except the Spiders. You have so little time."

"Don't you think, then ... " Ian paused and leaned closer to me so that I couldn't seem to see anything around his face just snow and

sappture and ink. "That maybe you should make the most of what time you have? That you should *one* while you're anve?"

I didn't see it coming the way I had with Jared. Ian was not as ia miliar to me. Melanie realized what he was going to do before I did, just a second before his lips touched mine.

Not

It wasn't like kissing Jarett With Jared, there was no thought, only Jesire No control. A spark to gasoline in inevitable. With Ian, I didn't even know what I felt. Everything was muddled and confused.

His ups were soft and warm. He pressed them only lightly to mine and then brushed them back and forth across my mouth.

"Good or bad?" he whispered against my lips

Bad! Bad, bad!

"I I can't think " When I moved my mouth to speak he moved his with it

"That sounds .. good."

His mouth pressed lown with more force now. He caught my lower up between his and pulled on it gently.

Melante wanted to bit him — so much more than she'd wanted to punch Jared. She wanted to shove him away and then kick his face. The image was horrible, it conflicted jarringly with the sensation of Jan's kiss.

"Please," I whispered.

"Yes?"

"Please stop I can't think. Please."

He sat once clasping his hands in front of him. "Okay" he said, his tone cautious

I pressed my bands against my face wishing I could push out Mel anie's anger

"Well at least nobody punched me." Ian grunned

"She wanted to do more than that Ugh I don't like it when she's mad It hurts my head. Anger is so - ug v."

"Why didn't she?"

"Because I didn't lose control. She only breaks tree when I m overwhelmed."

He watched as I kneaded my forchead.

Cosm down. I begged her. He s not touching me

Has be forgotten that I m here. Doesn't be care? This is me, it's me! I tried to explain that

What about you? Have you forgotten lared-

She throw the memories at me the way she didone in the beginning, only this time they were like blows. A thousand punches of his smue, his eyes, his lips on mine his bands on my skin.

Of course now Have you forgotten that you don't want me to love him?

"She's talking to you."

"Yelling at me," I corrected

"I can tell now I can see you concentrate on the conversation. I never noticed before today."

"She's not always this vocal"

"I am sorry. Melanie," he said "I know this must be impossible for you."

Again, she visualized smashing her foot into his scalpted nose leaving it crooked like Kyle's. *Tell him I don't want his apologies*

I winced.

lan half smiled, half grimaced "She doesn't accept"

I shook my head.

"So she can break free? It you're overwhelmed?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes, if she takes me by surprise and I'm too emotional. Emotion makes it hard to concentrate. But it's been more difficult for her lately. It's like the door between us is locked. I don't know why I *tried* to let her out when Ky e — "I stopped taking abruptly granding my teeth together

"When Kyle tried to sill you," he finished matter of facily. "You wanted her free? Why?"

I just stared at h.m.

"To fight him?" he guessed.

I didn't answer.

He sighed "Okay Don't tell me. Why do you think the door is locked?"

I frowned "I don't know Maybe the time passing. It worries us."

"But she broke through before, to punch Jared."

"Yes " I shuddered at the memory of my fist striking his arw

"Because you were overwhelmed and emotions,?"

"Yes."

"What did he do? Just kiss you?"

I nodded.

Ian flinched. His eyes tightened

"What?" I asked: "What's wrong?"

"When Jared kisses you you are overwhelmed by emotion."

I stated at him worried by the expression on his face. Melanic enjoyed it. That's right!

Hk sighed "And when I kiss you — you aren't sure if you like it You are not —, overwhelmed."

"Oh" Ian was ealous. How very strange this world was. "I m sorry."

"Don't be I told you I a give you time, and I don't mind waiting for you to think things through I don't mind that at a..."

"What do you mind" Because he minded something very much

He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "I saw how you loved Jamie. That was always really obvious. I guess I should have seen that you loved Jared, too. Maybe I didn't want to. It makes sense. You came here for the two of them. You love them both, the same way Melanie did. Jamie like a brother. And Jared..."

He was looking away, staring at the wall over me. I had to look away 100. I stared at the sunlight where it touched the red door

"How much of that is Melanie?" he wanted to know

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

I could barely hear his answer "Yes It does to me" With out looking at me or seeming to notice what he was Joing, Ian took my hand again

It was very quiet for a minute Even Melanie was still. That was nice-

Then, as though a switch had been flipped. Ian was his normal self-again. He laughed.

"Time is on my side," he said, grinning, "We've got the rest of our lives in here. One day you il wonder what you ever saw in Jared."

In your dreams.

I laughed with him, happy he was jok ng again

"Wanda? Wanda, can I come in?"

Jamie's voice started from down the hall and accompanied by the sound of his jugging steps, ended right outside the outside.

"Of course, Jamie."

I already had my hand held out to him before he shrugged the door aside. I hadn't seen him nearly enough latery. Unconscious or crippied. I hadn't been free to seek him out.

"Hey. Wanda Hey. Ian " Jamie was all grins his messy hair bot noing when he moved. He headed for my reaching hand, but Ian was in his way. So he settled for sitting on the edge of my mattress and resting his hand on my foot. "How are you feeling?"

"Better."

"Hungry yet? There's beef jerky and corn on the cobil could get you some."

"I'm okay for now How are your I haven't seen you much lately."

Jamie made a face "Sharon gave me detention."

I smiled. "What did you do?"

"Northing I was totally framed." His innocent expression was a bit overdone, and he quickly changed the subject. "Guess what? Jared was saying at lunch that he didn't think it was fair for you to have to move out of the room you were used to. He said we weren't being good hosts. He said you should move back in with me. Isn't that great? I asked him if I could tell you right away, and he said that was a good idea. He said you would be in here,"

"I'll bet be did," Ian murmured.

"So what do you think Wanda? We get to be roomies again!"

"But Jamie, where will Jared stay?"

"Was.—let me guess." Ian interrupted "I bet he said the room was big enough for three. Am I right?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

"So that's good, isn't it. Wandar It will be just like before we came here!"

It felt sort of like a razor sliding between my ribs when he said that — too clean and precise a pain to be compared to a blow or a break

Jamie analyzed my fortured expression with alarm "Oh No I mean but with you, too. It will be nice. The four of us, right?"

I tried to sugh through the pain, it didn't hurt any worse than not aughing.

Ian squeezed my hand.

"The four of us," I mumbled, "Nice."

amie crawled up the mattress, worming his way around Ian, to put his arms around my neck.

"Sorry Don't be sad."

"Don't worry about it"

"You know I sove you, too."

So sharp, so piercing, the emotions of this planet. Jamie had never said those words to me before. My whole body suddenly felt a tew degrees warmer.

So sharp. Me a ne agreed, will teing at her own pain

"Will you come back?" Jamie begged against my shoulder

I couldn't answer right away

"What does Mel want?" he asked

"She wants to live with you." I wh speced. I didn't have to check to know that

"And what do you want?"

*Do you want me to live with you?"

"You know I do, Wanda, Please"

I hesitated

"Please?"

"If that's what you want, Jamie Okay"

"Woo hoo!" Jamie crowed in invest "Cool I'm gonna go tell lared I" get you some food too okay?" He was already on his feet, bounding the mattress so that I felt it in my ribs

"Okay"

"You want something Ian?"

"Sure kid I want you to tell lared he's shameless."

"Hah?"

"Never mind. Go get Wanda some | nch "

"Sure And I'll ask Wes for his extra bed. Kyle can come back in here and everything will be like it should be!"

"Perfect." Ian said, and though I didn't look at his face. I knew he was rolling his eyes.

"Perfect." I whispered, and feit the razor's edge again

Worried

lan was coming to join me for lunch, a big smile glued into place on his face. I frying to cheer me up again.

I think you're overdoing the sarcism laters. Melanie tolume.

I ll keep that in mind

I hadn't heard from her much in the past week. Neither of as was good company right now. It was better if we avoided social interaction, even with each other

"Hey Wanda," Ian greeted me hopping up onto the counter be side me. He had a bowl of tomato soup in one hand still steaming. Mine was bestor me cooled and half full I was toying with a piece of roll, ripping it into tiny pieces.

I didn't answer him

"Oh come on." He put his hand on my knee. Mea's angry reaction was lethargic. She was too used to this kind of thing to really work up a good fit any note. "They II be back today. Before sunset, without a doubt."

"You so d that three days ago, and two days ago, and again yester-day," I reminded him.

"I have a good teching about today. Don't salk — it's so haman," he teased.

"I'm not suiking." I wasne I was so worned I could barely think straight. It didn't leave me energy to do anything else

"This isn't the first raid Jamie's gone on "

"That makes me fee so much better" Again with the sarcasm. Me ance was right — I really was overusing it

"He's got lared and Geoffrey and Trudy with him. And Kyle's here." Ian aughed. "So there's no way they light into any trouble."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay."

He turned his attention to his food and let me stew lan was nice that way—always trying to give me what I wanted even when what I wanted was unclear to either of us. His insistent attempts to distract me from the present anxiety excepted, of course I knew I didn't want that I wanted to worry it was the only thing I could do.

It had been a month since I'd moved back into Jamie and Jared's room. For three weeks of that time, the lour of us had lived together lared slept on a mattress wedged above the head of the bed where Jamie and I slept.

I digotten used to n — the sleeping part, at least I was having a hard time sleeping now in the empty room I m seed the sound of two other bodies breathing.

I hadn't gotten used to waking up every morning with Jared there. It still took me a second too long to return his morning greeting. He was not at ease, either, but he was a ways pointe. We were both very polite.

It was almost scripted at this point.

"Good morning. Wands, how did you sleep."

"Fine, thank you, and you?"

"Fine, thunks And ... Mel?"

"She's good, top, thanks."

Jamie's constant state of cuphor a and his happy chattering kept things from becoming too strained. He tasked about—and to — Melanie often until her name was no longer the source of stress it had once been when lared was present. Every day it got a lattle bit more comfortable, the pattern of my a te here a lattle but more pleasant.

We were sort of happy. Both Melanie and I

And then, a week ago. Jared had left for another short raid mostly to replace broken tools—and taken Jamie with him

"You tired?" Ian asked.

I realized I was rubbing at my eyes. "Not really."

"5till not sleeping well?"

"It's too quiet,"

"I could sleep with you — Oh, ca m down. Meianle You know what I meant."

Ian always noticed when Melanie's antagonism made melchinge

"I thought they were going to be back today " I challenged.

"Yours right I guess there's no need for rearranging."

l sighed

"Maybe you should take the afternoon off."

"Don't be stily," I told him "I've got pienty of energy for work."

He granted as though I'd said something that pleased him. Something he obeen hoping I would say

"Good. I could use some help with a project."

"What's the project?"

"I'll show you you finished there?"

I nodded.

He took my hand as he led me out of the kitchen. Again, this was so common that Melanie barely protested.

"Why are we going this way?" The eastern field did not need after tion. We'd been part of the group that had imagated a this morning.

Ian didn't answer. He was still graning

He led me down the eastern tunnel, past the field and into the container that ied to only one place. As soon as we were in the tunnel. I could hear voices echoting and a sporadic *third third* that it took me a moment to place. The stale, buter sulfur odor he ped link the sound to the memory.

"Inn, I m not in the mood"

"You said you had plenty of energy."

"To work. Not to play soccer."

"But Lily and Wes will be really disappointed. I promised them a

game of two-on-two. They worked so hard this morning to free up the afternoon..."

"Don't try to make the feel guilty," I said as we rounded the last curve. I could see the blue light of severa lamps, shadows flitting in front of them.

"Isn't it working?" he teased "C mon, Wanda. It will be good for you,"

He pulled me into the low-ceilinged game room, where Lily and Wes were passing the ball back and forth across the length of the field

"Hey Wanda Hey, lan" L. v ca .ec. to us

"This one's m. ie. O'Shea" Wes warned him

"You're not going to let me lose to Wes, are your" Ian marmared.

"You could best them alone."

"It would still be a forfeit. Ed never live it Jown."

I sighed. "Fine Fine Be that way."

Ian hugged me with what Melanie thought was unnecessary enthasiasm. "You're my very favorite person in the known universe."

"Thanks," I mottered dryly

"Ready to be hamiliated. Wandar" Wes taunted. "You may have taken the planet, but you're losing this game."

Ian laughed, but I didn't respond. The joke made me uneasy How could Wes make a joke about that? Humans were always surprising me

Melanie included. She dibeen in just as miserable a mond as I was,

but now she was suddenly excited

We didn, get to pury last time she explained I could tech her yearning to run — to run for pleasure rather than in fear Running was something she used to love Doing nothing won't get them home any faster. A distraction might be nice. She was a ready thinking strategy sizing up our opponents.

"Do you know the rules?" Luy asked me

I nodded. "I remember them."

Absently, I bent my leg at the knee and grabbed my ankie behind me, pulling a to stretch out the missies. It was a fam har position to my hody. I stretched the other leg and was pleased that it fe t whole. The bruise on the back of my thigh was faded yearow, almost gone. My

side felt fine, which made me think that my rib had never really been broken.

I'd seen my face while I was cleaning mirrors two weeks ago. The scar forming on my cheek was dark red and as big as the palm of my hand, with a dozen jagged points around the edges. It bothered Melabie more than it did me.

"I if take the goal." Ian tood me, while Liny tell back and Wes paced beside the ball. A mismatch. Melanic liked this. Competition appeared to her

From the moment the game started. Wes karking the ball back to Lily and then sprinting ahead to get around me for her pass—there was very little time to think. Only to react and to feel. See Lily shift her body, measure the direction this would send the ball. Gut Wes off—ah but he was surprised by how fast I was — anneh the ball to Ian and move up the field. Lily was playing too far forward. I faced her to the lantern goalpost and won. Ian aimed the pass perfect v. and I scored the first goal.

It felt good the stretch and pull of muscie, the sweat of exertion rather than plain heat the teamwork with Ian. We were well matched I was quick, and his aim was deadly. Wes's goading dried up before Ian scored the third goal.

Lily called the game when we hit twenty-one. She was breathing hard. Not me, I felt good, mi scies warm and limber

Wes wanted another round, but Lily was done

"Face it, they're better"

"We got hustled."

"No one ever said she couldn't play"

"No one ever said she was a pro, either."

I Liked that - it made me smile

"Don't be a sore loser," Luy said, reaching out to tickle Wes's stom ach playfully the caught her fingers and pulled her closer to him. She laughed tugging away, but Wes reeled her in and planted a soud kiss on her laughing mouth.

Ian and I exchanged a quick, startled glance

"For you, I will lose with grace" Wes told her, and then set her free.

Lay's smooth caramel skin had taken on a bit of pink on her cheeks and neck. She peeked at Ian and me to see our reaction

"And now" Wes continued. "I'm off to get reinforcements. We il see how your lattle ranger does against Kyie, Ian." He loobed the ball into the far dark corner of the cave, where I heard it spiash into the spring.

Ian trotted off to retrieve it while I compound to look at Lily currents.

She laughed at my expression, sounding self-conscious, which was anusual for her. "I know, I know."

"I low long has that been going on?" I wondered.

She grimaced.

"Not my business. Sorry"

"It's oway It's not a secret — how could anything be a secret here anyway? It's just really — new to me. It's sort of your fault," she added smiling to show that she was teasing me.

I telt a little gut ty anyway. And confused. "What did I do?"

"Nothing," she assured me "It was Wess — reaction to you that surprised me I didn't know he had so much depth to him. I was never really aware of him before that Oh, well. He's too young for me, but what does that matter here?" She laughed again. "It's strange how it and ove go on I didn't expect that."

"Yeah Kind of funny how that happens" Ian agreed I hadn't heard him return. He signifies arm around my shoulders. "It's nice though. You do know Wes has been infatuated with you since he first got here, right?"

"So he says. I hadn't noticed."

Ian laughed. "Then you're the only one So. Wanda, how about some one-on-one while we're wa tang?"

I could feel Mclanie's wordless enthusiasm. "Okav."

He set me have the ball first, holding back hugging the goal area My first shot cut between him and the post, scoring I rushed him when he kicked oft, and got the ball back. I scored again

He's letting us win, Mel grumbied.

"Come on, Ian. Play."

"I am "

Tell him he's playing like o girl.

"Playing like a girl."

He laughed, and I slipped the ball away from him again. The taunt

wash't enough. I had an inspiration then, and I shot the ball through bis goal, guessing it would probably be the last time I got to do it.

Mel objected. I don't like this idea

I'll bet it works, though

I put the ball back at center he d. "You win, and you can sleep in my room while they're gone." I needed a good night's rest.

"First to ten" With a grunt, he punched the ball past me so hard that it rebounded off the distant invisible wan behind my goal and came back to us.

Hooked at Lily, "Was that wide?"

"No: tt looked dead center to me"

"One-three," Ian announced.

It took him fifteen minutes to win, but at least I got to rest viwork. I even squeezed in one more goal, of which I was proud. I was gasping for air when he stole the ball from me and sailed it through my goal posts for the last time.

He wasn't winded, "Ten-four, I win."

"Good game," I huffed.

"Tired?" he asked, the innocence in his tone a bit overdone. Being funny. He stretched, "I think I m ready for bod myself." He leered in a melodramatic way.

I winced.

"Aw Mei, you know I'm jok ng. Be nice."

Lily eyed us, mystified

"Jared's Meiante objects to me." Ian told her winking.

"I wonder what's taking Wes so long?" Ian muttered not taking much notice of her reaction. "Should we go find out? I could use some water."

"Me. 100," I agreed

"Bring some back." Lily didn't move from where she was half sprawled on the floor

As we entered the parrow to one! I an threw one arm lightly around my waist.

"You know," he said. "it's really unfair for Melanie to make you suffer when she's angry at me,"

"Since when are humans fair?"

"Good point"

"Besides, she u be glad to make you suffer if I'd let her." He laughed

"That's ruce about Wes and Lily don't you throke" he said

"Yes. They both seem very happy I like that "

"I, ke it too. Wes finally got the girl Gives me hope." He winked at me. "Do you think Melanie would make you very uncomfortable if I were to kiss you right now?"

I statfened for a second, then took a feep breath, "Probably "

Oh, yes

"Definitely."

Ian sighed

We heard Wes shouting at the same time. His voice came from the end of the tunnel getting closer with each word.

"They re back" Wanda, they re back."

It took meness than a second to process, and then I was sprinting. Behind me Hap mumbled something about wasted effort.

I nearly knocked Wes down "Where?" I gasped.

"In the plaza,"

And I was off again. I flow into the big garden mom with my eyes a ready searching. It wasn't hard to find them, famile was standing at the front of a group of people near the entrance to the southern tunnel.

"Hey, Wanda." he yelled, waving.

Trudy held his arm as I ran around the edges of the field, as if she were holding him back from running to meet me

I grapped his shoulders with both hands and pulled him to me "Oh, Jamie."

"Did ya miss me?"

"Just a tiny bit. Where is everyone? Is everyone home? Is everyone only?" Besides Jamie. Trudy was the only person here who was back from the raid. Everyone else in the little crowd. Lucina, Rith Ann. Kyle, Travis, Violetta, Riid... was welcoming them home.

"Tiveryone's back and well." Trudy assured me

My eyes swept the big cave "Where are they?"

"Uh gerting cleaned up unloading

I wanted to offer my help - anything that would get me to where

Jared was so I could see with my own eyes that he was safe — but I knew I wouldn't be anowed to see where the goods were coming in

"You look like you need a bath" I told Jamie, rumpling his dirty knotted hair without letting go of him

"Fle's si prosed to go ue down." Trudy said.

"Irudy " famie muttered, giving her a dark look

Trudy gianced at me quickly, then looked away

"Lie Low or the Print I stared at lamie pulling back to get a good look at him. He didn't seem tired this eyes were bright, and his cheeks flushed under his tan. My eyes raked over him once and then froze on his right leg.

There was a ragged hole in his leans a few inches above his knee. The fabric around the hole was a dark redd shiprown, and the ominous color spread in a long stain all the way to the cutf.

Blood. Meanie realized with norror

"Jamte What happened?"

"Thanks, Trudy"

"She was gotag to notice soon enough. C'mon, we'll talk while you limp."

Trudy put her arm under his and helped him hop forward one slow step at a time, keeping his weight on his left leg.

"Jamic tell me what happened." I put my arm around him from the other side, trying to carry as much of his weight as I could.

"It's really stuped. And totally my taux. And it could have happened here."

"Tel. me."

He sighed. "I tripped with a konfe in my hand."

I shuddered. "Shouldn't we be taking you the other way? You need to see Doc."

"That's where I'm coming from That's where we went first."

"What did Doc say?"

"It's fine. He cleaned it and bandaged it and said to go lie down."

"And have you walk all this way." Why didn't you stay in the hospital?"

Jamie maue a face and glanced up at Trudy like he was looking for an answer

"Jamie will be more comfortable on his bed," she suggested

"Yeah." he agreed quickly "Who wants to ite around on one of those awful coss?"

I looked at them and then behind me. The crowd was gone. I could hear their voices echoing back down the southern corridor.

What was that about . Mel wondered wan v

It occurred to me that Trudy wasn't a much better har than I was When she disaid the others from the raid were unloading and cleaning up, there was a false note to her voice. I thought I remembered her eyes flickering to the right, back toward that furned

"Hey, Kid Hey, Trudy "Ian had caught up to us.

"H. Ian" they greeted him at the same time.

"What happened here?"

"Fell on a kn.te," Jamze grunted, ducking his head. Ian laughed.

"I don't think it's funny," I told him, my voice tight. Melanic tranic with worry in my head, imagined slapping him. I ignored her

"Could happen to anybody," Ian said, planting a light punch on Jamie's arm.

"Right," Jamie muttered.

"Where's everybody?"

I watched Trudy from the corner of my eye as she answered him

"They, up had some unloading to finish up." This time her eyes moved toward the southern tunnel very deliberately, and lan's expression hardened, turned enraged for half a second. Then Trudy glanced back at me and cat ght me watching.

Distract them, Melante whispered.

I looked down at Jamie quickly.

"Are you hongry?" I asked him.

"Yeah."

"When aren a you bungry?" Ian teased. His face was relaxed again. He was better at deception than Trudy

When we reached our room. Jam'e sank gratefully onto the big mattress.

"You sure you're okay?" I checked.

"It's nothing. Really. Doc says I .. be fine in a few days."

I noducu, though I was not convinced

"I'm going to go clean up." Trudy murmured as she left

Ian propped himself against the wall-going nowhere.

Keep your face uoten when you are. Meanic suggested

"lan-" I stared intently at Jamie's bloody leg. "Do you mind get ting us some food- I'm hungry loo"

"Yeah. Get as something good."

I could feel Jan's eyes on me, but I didn't look up

"Okay" he agreed. "I I, be back in just a second." He emphasized the short time.

I kept my gaze down, as if I were exam ming the wound, until I heard his footsteps fade.

"You arent mad at me?" Jamie asked

"Of course not."

"I know you didn't want me to go."

"You're sate now that shall that matters" I patted his arm absent mindedly. Then I got to my feet and let my hair now chin length fail forward to hide my face.

"I. be right back I forgot something I wanted to tell Ian."

"What?" he asked, confused by my tone

"You'll be okey here by yourself?"

"Course I will." he retorted, sidetracked

I ducked out around the screen before he could ask anything else.

The hall was clear, Ian out of sight. I had to hurry. I knew he was already suspicious. He dinoticed that I dinoticed Trudy's awkward and artificial explanation. He wouldn't be gone long.

I walked quickly, but didn't run, as I moved through the big plaza. Purposeful, as if I were on an errand. There were only a few people there—Reid headed for the passageway that led to the bathing poor Roth Ann and Heidi paused by the eastern corndor chatting, Lily and Wes, their backs to me, holding hands. No one paid me any attention. I stated ahead as if I were not tocused on the southern tunnel, only turning in at the very last second.

As soon as I was in the pitch black of the corridor, I sped up, jogging along the familiar path.

Some instanct told me this was the same thing — that this was a repeat of the last time fared and the others had come home from a raid, and everyone was sad, and Dot had gotten drank, and no one would answer my questions. It was happening again, whatever I wasn't

THE HOST 407

supposed to know about. What I didn't want to know about according to Ian. I felt prickles on the back of my neck. Maybe I aidn't want to know.

Yes, you do. We both do
I'm frightened
Me, too
I tan as quietly as I could down the dark tunne.

Horrified

slowed when I heard the sound of voices. I was not close enough to the hospital for it to be Doc. Others were on their way back. I pressed myse flagatist the rock wall and crept forward as quiet y as I could. My breathing was ragged from running. I covered my mouth with my hand to stifle the sound.

" why we keep doing this." someone complained

I wasn't sure whose voice it was. Someone I didn't know well.

Maybe Violettar It held that same depressed tone that I recognized from before. It crased any notion that I'd been imagin ng things.

"Doc dun't want to It was Jared's idea this time "

I was sure that it was Geoffrey who spoke now, though his voice was a true changed by the subdued revision in it. Geoffrey had been with Trudy on the raid of course. They did everything together

"I thought he was the biggest opponent to this bus ness."

That was Travis, I guessed

"He's more motivated now" Geoffrey answered. His voice was quiet but I could tell he was angry about something.

They passed just half a foot from where I cranged into the rocks. I froze, holding my breath.

"I think it's sick," Violetta muttered. "Disgusting. It's never going to work."

They walked slowly, their steps weighted with despair

No one answered her No one spoke again in my hearing. I stayed motionless until their tootsteps had faded a little, but I couldn't wuit until the sound disappeared completely. Ian might be following me already.

I crept forward as quickly as I could and then started jugging again when I decided it was safe

I saw the first faint it into of daylight streaming around the curving tunne, ahead, and I shifted into a quieter lope that still kept me moving swittly. I knew that once I was around the gradual arc, I would be able to see the doorway into Doc's realm. I followed the bend, and the light grew brighter.

I moved cautiously now putting each foot down with silent care. It was very quiet. For a moment, I wondered if I was wrong and there was no one here at al.. Then, as the uneven entrance came into view, throwing a block of white sunlight against the opposite wall, I could hear the sound of quiet sobbing.

I tiptoed right to the edge of the gap and paused listening

The sobbing continued. Another sound, a soft, thythmic thidding, kept time with it

"There, there" It was Job's voice thick with some emotion "Sokay Doc Don't take it so hard"

Hushed tootsteps, more than one set, were moving around the room. Fabric rustling. A brushing sound it reminded me of the sounds of cleaning.

There was a smell that didn't belong here. Strange—not quite metallic but not quite anything else, either. The smell was not familiar. I was sure I had never smelled it before—and yet I had an odd feeling that it should be familiar to me.

I was afraid to move around the corner

What's the worst they will do to us? Me, pointed out Make us leave?

You're right

Things had definitely changed if that was the worst I could tear from the humans now

I took a deep breach — not sing again that strange a rong small — and eased around the rocky edge into the hospital

No one noticed me.

Doc was kneeding on the floor his face buried has bands his shoulders heaving, leb leaned over him patting his back.

lared and Kyle were laying a critide stretcher beside one of the cots in the midule of the room. Jareu's face was hard—the mask had come back while he was away.

The cots were not emply, as they usually were. Something, hidden under dark green blankets, falled the length of both of them. Long and irregular with familiar of tyes and angles.

Doc's homematic table was arranged at the head of these cors in the brightest spot of sunlight. The table gittered with silver is show scalpe's and an assortment of antiquated medical tools that I couldn't put a name to.

Brighter than these were other silver things. Shimmering segments of silver stretched in twisted, tortured pieces across the table — tiny silver strands plucked and naked and scattered — spla ters of silver liquid smeared on the table, the blankets, the walls

The quet in the room was shattered by my scream. The whole room was shattered. It spun and shook to the sound whirled around me so that I couldn't find the way out. The walls, the silver stained walls, rose up to block my escape no marter which way I turned.

Someone shouted my name but I couldn't hear whose you're it was. The screaming was too loud. It hart my head. The stone wall looking silver slammed into me and I fel to the floor. Heavy hands held me there.

"Doc, help!"

"What's wrong with her?"

"Is it having a fit?"

"What did she see?"

"Nothing -- nothing. The Jodies were covered."

That was a le. The bodies were hideously uncovered is rewn in obscene continuous across the gattering table. Mut ated id sniembered fortuna hodies, ripped into grotesque shreds.

I had clearly seen the vestigral teclers still attached to the truncated anterior section of a child hast a child! A baby. A baby thrown hap-hazardly in maimed pieces across the table smeared with its own blood...

My stomach rolled like the walls were roung, and acid clawed its way up my throat

"Wanda? Can you hear me?"

"Is she conscious?"

"I think she's going to throw up "

The last voice was right. Hard hands held my head while the acid in my stomach violently overflowed.

"What do we do, Doc?"

"Hold on to her - don't let her hart berseif"

I coughed and squirmed trying to escape. My throat cleared.

"Let me go." I was find it able to choke out. The words were garbled. "Cret away from me. Get away you're monsters. Torturers."

I shrieked wordlessly again (wisting against the restraining arms)

"Calm down Wanda" Shhi Itis okay " That was Jared's voice. For once it didnomarter that it was Jared.

"Monster!" I screamed at him.

"She's hysterical," Doc told him. "Hold on."

A sharp, stinging blow whipped across my face

There was a gasp, far away from the immed ate chaos.

"What are you doing?" Ian roared.

"It's having a seizure of something. Ian Doc's trying to bring it around "

My cars were ringing, but not from the slap. It was the smelt—the smell of the solver blood or pping down the wals—the smell of the blood of souls. The room writhed around me as though it were alive. The light twisted into strange patierns curved into the shapes of monsters from my past. A Vulture unitaried its wings—a claw beast swang its heavy pincers toward my face. Does miled and reached for me with silver trickling from his fingertaps.

The room spun once more, slow vi and then went black

ė

Unconsciousness d'un't claim me tor long, le must have been on viseu onds later when my head cleared. I was a clool on lucid. I wished I could stay oblivious longer.

I was moving rocking back and terth, and it was too black to see Mercularly, the normbite smed had faded. The musty humic air of the caves was like perfume.

The feeling of being carried, being cradied, was familiar. That first week after Kylo had injured me. I ditraveled many places in Ian's arms.

"—thought she d have guessed what we were up to Looks . ke ! was wrong," Jared was murmuring.

"You think that's what happened?" Ian's voice cut hard in the quiet tunnet. "That she was scared because Doc was trying to take the other souls out? That she was atraid for herself?"

Jared didn't answer for a minute. "You don't?"

Ian made a sound in the back of his throat. 'No I don't As disgusted as I am that you would bring back more... victims for Doc bring them back now... as much as that turns my stomach, that's not what upset her if low can you be so bind? Can't you magine what that must have looked. The to her in there?"

"I know we had the bodies covered before - "

"The *term g hodies* Jared. Oh I'm sure Wanda would be upset by a human corpse—she's so gent e-violence and death aren't a part of her normal world. But think what the things on that table must have meant to her."

It took him snother moment, "Oh."

"Yes It you or I had walked in on a human vivisection with torn body parts, with blood splattered in everything, it wouldn't have been as had for us as it was for her. We dihave seen it all before — even before the invasion in horror movies, at least I dibet she's never been exposed to anything like that in all her lives."

I was getting sick again. His words were bringing it back. The sight. The sme...

"Let me go." I whispered. "Put me cown."

"I didn't mean to wake you. I'm sorry." The last words were fer vent, apotogizing for more than waking me

"Let me go."

"You're not we - 11 take you to your room"

"No. Put me down now."

*Wanda "

"Now!" I shouted I shoved against Ians chest, kicking my legs free at the same time. The ferocity of my struggle surprised him. He lost his hold on me, and I half fell into a crouch on the floor

I sprang up from the crouch running.

"Wanca "

"Let her go,"

"Don't rouch me' Wanda, come back'"

It sounded the they were wrestling behind me, but I didn't slow. Of course they were fighting. They were humans. Violence was pleasure to them.

I didn't pause when I was back in the light. I sprinted through the big cavern without looking at any of the monsters there. I could feel their eyes on me, and I didn't care.

I didn't care where I was going either Just somewhere I could be more. I avoided the tunnels that had people near them running down the first empty one I could find.

It was the eastern tunnel. This was the second time I d sprinted through this corridor today. Last time in joy, this time in borror. It was hard to remember how I'd felt this atternoon, knowing the rainers were home. Everything was dark and gruesome now including their return. The very stones seemed evil.

This way was the right choice for me though. No one had any reason to come here, and it was empty

I ran to the farthest end of the tunnel, into the deep night of the empty game room. Could I really have played games with them such a short time ago? Believed the smues on their taces, not seeing the beasts underneath.

I moved forward until I stumbled ankle deep into the only waters of the dark spring. I backed away, my hand outstretched, searching for a wall. When I found a rough ridge of stone—sharp-edged benealbing fingers — I turned into the depression behind the protrusion and curied myself into a tight ball on the ground there.

It wasn't what we thought. Doc wasn't hurting anyone on purpose he was just trying to save —

GET OUT OF MY HEAD I shrieked

As I to rust her away from me gagged her so that I wouldn't have to beat her justifications. I realized how weak she digrown in all hose months of mend ness. How much I dibeen a lowing Encouraging

It was almost too easy to slicince her. As easy as it should have been from the beginning.

It was only me now. List me, and the pain and the hortor that it would never escape. I would never mix have that image in my head again. I would never be tree of it. It was forever a part of me.

I did n't know how to mourn here. I could not mourn in human ways for these lost you's wasse haines I would never know. For the broken child on the table.

That never had to movern on the Origin I didn't know how it was done there in the truest home of my kind. So I settled for the way of the Bats. It seemed appropriate than where it was as black as being blind. The Bats mourned with sience in not singing for weeks on end until the pain of the nothingness lett behind by the lack of misic was worse than the pain of losing a soul. I diknown loss there. A frien the fled in a freak accident a falling tree in the night found too late to save him from the crushed body or his host. Spiraling in Upward Harmony, those were the words that would have he if his name in this language. Not exact, but close enough. There had been no horror in his death, only grief. An accident

The bit shing scream was too discordant to remind me of our songs. I could grieve beside its harmony-free clarier.

I wrapped my arms tight viaround my shoulders and mourned for the child and the other sea, who had used with it. My siblings My family. If I had found a way free of this place, if I had warned the Seekers, their remains would not be so casually mangled and mixed together in that be soil steeps I room.

I wanted o cry, to keep in misery. But that was the luman way So I locked in vilips and hunched in the Larkness hold, ig the pain thade.

We sitence in mourning was stole a from me

I our them a tew hours. I heard their looking, heard their voices echo and warp in the long inhes of air. They were on any far melley pecting an answer. When they roce led no answer they brought lights

Not the unit to be lancerns that in ght never have revealed my hid ig place here it med under a this brackness, but the sharp yourse write flash, ghts. They swept back and forth per ladents of light. Even with the flash after they didn't find me amounthe third search of the poor. Why a such it they leave the alone?

When the flashlight's beam finally disinterred me there was a gosp of relief

"I found her. To the others to get back inside! She's in here after all."

, knew the young but I don't put a name to it Just another monster

"Wandar Wandar Are you a "right"

I fidn't taise my head or open my eyes. I was in mourning

"Where's Jan /"

"Should we get Jamie, do you think?"

"He shouldn't be on that leg."

Jamie I shuddered at his name. My Jamie He was a monster too. He was just like the rest of them. My Jamie It was a physical pain to think of him.

"Where is she?"

"Over hime Jared Shels not in tesponding."

"We didn't touch her."

"Here give me the light." Jared said "Now, the rest of you get out of here. Emergency liver Give her some air lokase."

There was a shuffling noise that dion't trave, far

"Serious v people You're not he ping. Leave A, the way out."

The shufting was slow at first that their became more productive I could hear many tootsteps fading away in the more and then disappearing out of it.

Janes waved until it was silent again

"Okay Wanda it's just you and me

He waited for some kind of answer

"Look I guess that must have been pretty bad We never wanted you to see that, I'm sorry,"

Sorry Centhrey also all a was lared sindea. He wanted to cut me out, slice me into latic pieces, fling trivial and on the wall. If a slow vi-

mangle a million of me if he could find a way to keep his favorite monster above with him. Stash us all to suvers.

He was quiet for a long time still waiting for me to react

"You look like you want to be alone. That's okay I can keep them away, if that's what you want."

I didn't move.

Something touched my shoulder I cringed away from it, into the sharp-stones

"Sorry," he muttered.

I heard him stand and the light — red behind my closed eyes began to fade as he walked away

He met someone in the mouth of the cave

"Where is she?"

"She wants to be alone. Let her be."

"Don't get in my way again, Howe."

"Do you think she wants comfort from you? From a human?"

"I wasn't party to this-"

Jared answered in a lower voice, but I could still hear the echoes. "Not this time You're one of us, Ian Her enemy Did you hear what she said to there? She was screaming monsters. That's how she sees us now. She doesn't want your comfort."

"Give me the light,"

They didn't speak again. A minute passed, and I heard one set of slow footsteps moving amond the edge of the room. Eventually, the hight swept across me, turning my lids red again.

I huld ed myself more tightly together expecting him to touch me

There was a quiet sigh, and then the sound of him sitting on the stone not as close beside me as I would have expected

With a click, the light disappeared.

I we ted in the silence for a long time for him to speak, but he was ust as silent as I was

I have I stopped waiting and returned to my morrhing, Ian did not interrupt. I sat in the blackness of the big hold in the ground and grieved for lost sholls with a hi man at my side.

Vanished

an sat with me for three days in the darkness.

He left for only a few short minutes at a time, to get us food and water. At first, fan ate, though I did not. Then, as he realized that it wasn't a loss, if appetite that left my tray till he stopped eating too.

I used his brief absences to deal with the physical needs that I could not ignore, thankful for the proximity of the odorous stream. As my tast lengtheried, those needs vanished

I couldn't keep from sleeping but I did not make myself comfortable. The first day I wake to find my head and shoulders tradied on his tap. I recoiled from him shuddering so violently that he did not repeat the gesture. After that, I sumped against the stones where I was and when I woke I would curl back up into my silent bac at once.

"Please" Ian whispered on the third day—at least I thought to was the third day, there was no way to be sure of the passing time in this dark, such, place. It was the first time he a sporce.

I knew a tray of food was in front of me. He pushed ri closer, till it touthed my leg, I cringed away.

"Please, Wanda Please ear something."

He put his hand on my arm but moved away quickly when I flinched out from under it.

"Please don't hate me I'm so sorry. If I'd known — I would have stopped them. I won't let it happen again."

He would never stop them. He was just one among many. And, as lared had so die died no objections before. I was the enemy. Even in the most compassionate, humanicind's lim, ed scope of mercy was reserved for their own.

I knew Doc could never intentionally inflict pain on another person. I doubted he would even be capable of watching such a thing, render as his feelings were. But a worm, a centipeach Why would be care about the agony of a strange atten creature? Why would it bother bim to marker a baby — slow v, slicing it apart piece by piece — if it had no human mouth to scream with?

"I should have told you," Ian whispered

Would it have mattered it I'd samply been told rather than having seen the tortured remains for myself? Would the pain be less strong? "Please ext."

The shence returned. We sat in it for a while, maybe another hour

Isn got up and wasked quietly away.

I could make no sense of my emotions. In that moment, I hated the body I was bound to. How did it make sense that his going depressed me? Why should it pain me to have the solitude I craved? I wanted the monster back, and that was plainly wrong.

I wasn't alone for long. I didn't know it lan had gone to get him or it held been waiting for lan to leave, but I recognized Jeb's contemp ative whistle as it approached in the darkness.

The whistling stopped a few feet from me and there was a loud cack. A beam of yellow light burned my eyes, I blinked against it

Jeb set the flash light down builb up. It threw a circle of light on the low ceilling and made a wider more diffuse sphere of light around us

Jeb sett ed himself against the wall beside me

"Gonna starve yourself, then? Is that the plane"

I glared at the stone floor.

If I was being honest with inviself I knew that my mourning was over I had grieved I hadn't known the child of the other soul in the cave of horrors. I could not grieve for strangers to ever No. now I was angry.

"You wanna die there are easier and faster ways."

As if I wasn't aware of that

"So give me to Doc, then " I croaked

Job wasn't surprised to hear me speak. He noduced to timself as if this was exactly what he'd known would come out of my mouth.

'Did you expect us to just give up, Wanderer-" leb's voice was stern and more senous than I had ever heard it before. "We have a stronger sun val instance han that Of course we want to find a way to get our minds back. It could be any one of as someday. So many people we love are already lost.

"It isn easy It nearly kins Doc each time be tails—you've seen that Bur this is our reality. Wanda. This is our world. We've lost a war. We are about to be extinct. We're trying to find ways to save our selves."

For the first time, Jeb spoke to me as a I were a so it and not a harman. I had a sense that the distinction had always been clear to him though. He was use a courteous monster.

I couldn't deny the truth of what he was saying or the sense of it. The shock had worn off and I was myself again. It was in my nature to be fair.

Some lew of these humans could see my side of things. Ian, at least. Then I look could lonsider their perspective. They were monsters but maybe monsters who were instiffed in what they were doing.

Of course they would think violence was the answer. They wouldn't be able to imagine any other solution. Could I beame them that their genetic programming restricted their problem solving abilities in this way?

I cleared my throat but my voice was still hearse with disuse "Hacking up babies won't save ar vone, Jeh Now they're all dead."

He was get et for a moment. "We can't tell vour voung from vour old."

"No, I know that,"

"Your kind don't spare our babies."

"We don't offure them, though. We never intentionally cause any one pain."

"You do worse than it at You crase them."

"You do both."

"We do yes because we have to try We have to keep fighting It's the only way we know. It's keep trying or turn our faces to the wall and use." He taised one eyebrow at me

That must have been what it looked like I was doing

I signed and took the water bottle Ian had left close to my foot. I drained it in one long pull, and then cleared my throat again.

"It will never work Job. You can keep a string us out in pieces, but you it ast murder more and more sentient creatures or both species. We do not will highly kill, but our bodies are not weak either. Our at tachments may look like soff silver hate but they relstronger than your organs. That's what's happening usn't to Doc's it es up my family and their limbs stired through the brains of yours."

"L.ke cottage cheese," he agreed.

I gagged and then shouldered at the image

"It makes me sick, too" he admitted. "Dot gets real bent out of shape thery time he thinks he's got it cracked it goes south again. He's tried everyting he can think of but he can t save them from getting turned into patienal. Your souls don't respond to in ected sectation in a poison."

My voice came out rough with new horror "Ot course not Our chemical makeup is completely different"

"Once one of yours seemed to guess what was going to happen Before Duc could knock the human out the silver thingy tore up his brain from the inside Course, we didn't know that until Duc opened him up. The guy just collapsed."

I was surprised, strangely impressed. That so, i must have been very brave. I had not had the courage to take that step, even in the beginning when I was a de they were going to try to torture this very information from mu. I didn't mag neithey would try to slash the answer out for themselves, that course was so obviously doomed to failure, it had never occurred to me.

"Joh, we are rolatively riny creatures, at eriv dependent on unwill-

ing hosts. We wouldn't have jasted very long if we didn't have some Jefenses."

"I'm not denying that your kind have a right to those detenses. I'm just tering you that we're goona keep fighting back however we can. We don't mean to cause anyone pain. We're makin this up as we go. But we wall keep fighting."

We looked at each other.

"Then maybe you should have Doc suce me up. What else am I good for?"

"Now now Don't be say Wanda We hamans aren't so logical as an that We have a greater range of good and bad in us than you do Well, maybe mostly the bad."

I nodded at that, but he kept going, ignoring me

"We value the individual. We probably put too much emphas sion the individual of it comes right down to it. How many people, to the abstract would. He is say Paige. How many people would she say rince to keep Andy adve? The answer wouldn't make any sense if you were looking at the whole of humanity as equals.

"The way you are valued here—Well, that don't make much sense when you took at it from humanity's perspective, either But there's some who would value you above a human stranger. Have to admit, I put myse first that group. I count you as a friend, Wanda Course, that's not gonna work well if you hate me."

"I don't hate you, Jeb. But"

"Yeah?"

"I just don't see how I can live here anymore. Not if you re going to the slaughtering my family in the other room. And I can't leave obviously. So you see what I mean? What else is there for me but Doc's pointless cutting?" I shuddered.

He nouded seriously "Now that's a real valid point. It's not fair to

ask you to live with that."

My stomach dropped "If I get a choice I'd rather you shot me, actually," I whispered.

Jeb laughed. "Slow down there honey Nobody's shooting my friends, or backin' em up. I know you're not ying Wanda If you say doing it our way isn't going to work then we're going to have to rethink things. I'll te, the boys they to not to bring any more souls back

for now Besides. I think Docs nerves are loast file cant take much more of this."

"You could be lying to me." I reminded him. "I probably couldn't tell."

"You'll have to trust must be Because I'm not going to shoot you. And I'm not going to let you starve yourself, either Flat something, kid. That's an order."

I took a deep breath, trying to think I wasn't sure if we'd come to an accommodation or not. Nothing made sense in this body. I liked the people here too much. They were triends. Monstrous friends that I couldn't see in the proper light while sink in emotion.

Jeh picked up a thick square of combread soaked through with stolen honey and shoved it into my hand.

It made a mess there, crumbling into glacy morsels that strick to my fingers. I sighed again and started cleaning them off with my tongue.

"That's a gir. We'll get over this rough spot. In ngs are gonna work out here you see Try to think positive."

"Think positive." I mumbled around a mouthful of tood, shaking my head with disbenef, Only Jeb.

lan came back then. When he walked into our circle of light and saw the food in my hand, the look that spread across his face filled me with guilt. It was a look of joyous relict.

No, I had never ment one sy caused anyone physical pain but I had hurt Ian deeply enough just by nurting mose f. Haman lives were so impossibly tangled. What a mess.

"Here you are Job" he so d in a subdued voice as he sat down across from us just slightly closer to Jeb. "Jarea guessed you might be here."

I dragged myself half a foot toward him my arms aching from being motion essiso long, and put my hand on his.

"Sorry," I whispered.

He turned his hand up to hold mine. "Don't apologize to me."

"I should have known Jeb's right Of course you fight back. How can I blame you for that?"

"It's different with you here. It shot if have stopped."

But my being here had only made it that much more important to

so we the problem. How to rip me out and keep Melanie here. How to erase me to bring her back.

"All s tair in war." I murmured, try ng to smile.

He grinned weak y back. "And love. You lorget that part."

"Cicay, break it up " Jeb mumbled. "I'm not done here."

Hooked at him curious v. What more was there?

"Now." He took a deep breath. "Try not to freak out again, okay." he asked, looking at me.

I froze, gripping Ian's hand ughter

Ian threw an anxious glance at Jeb

"You're going to te I her?" Ian asked

"What now," I gasped "What is it note."

Jeb had his poker face on "It's Jamie"

Those two words turned the world apside down again

For three long days I a been Wanderer a sou, among humans, I was suduenly Wanda again a very confused soul with human emotions that were too powerful to control

I umped to my teet—yanking Ian up with me, my hand locked on his like a vise — and then swayed my head spring.

"Sheesh I said don't treak out Wanda Jamie's okay. He's just really anxious about you. He heard what happened and he's been assing for you — worned out of his mind, that kid is — and I don't think it's good for him. I came down here to ask you to go see him. But you can't go like this. You look horrible. It will just apset him for no good reason. Sit down and eat some more lood."

"His leg?" I demanded.

"There's a little intection." Ian marmated "Doc wants him to stay down or he dihave come to get you a long time ago. It lared wasn't practically pinning him to the bod, he would have come anyway."

Job nooded "Tarea almost came here and carried you out by force but I told him to let me speak to you first. It wouldn't do the kid any good to see you catatonic."

My blood for as though it had changed into see water. Sarely just my imagination.

"What's being done?"

Jeb shrugged "Norhan to do K d's strong, he ll fight it off "

"Nothing to do? What do you mean?"

"it's a pacterial infection," Ian sa to "We don't have antibiotics anymore."

"Because they don't work—the batter a are smarter than your medicines. There has to be something better something else."

"Well, we don't have anything else" Jeb said. "He's a healthy kid. It just has to run its course."

"Run ats course" I marmured the words in a daze

"Eat something," Ian arged "You'll worry him if he sees you like this."

I ruobed my eyes, trying to think straight

Jamie was sick. There was nothing to treat him with here. No options but waiting to see if his body could heal uself. And if it couldn't ...

"No," I gasped

I felt as it I were standing on the edge of Walter's grave again listening to the sound of sand talling into the darkness.

"No," I mouned, fighting against the memory.

I turned mechanically and started walking with stiff strides toward the exit

"Wait" Ian said, but he didn't pui, against the hand he still held. He kept pace with me

leb caught up to me on the other side and shoved more food into my free hand.

"Eat for the kid's sake," he said.

I bit into it without tasting, chewed without thinking swallowed without feeling the food go down.

"Knew she was gonna overreact." Jeb grumbied.

"So why did you tell her?" Ian asked frustrated.

Jeb didn't answer. I wondered why he didn't. Was this worse even than I imagined?

"Is be in the hospital?" I asked in an emotionless, inflection essivoice

"No, no " Ian assured me quickly. "He's in your room."

I didn't even feel relief. Too numb for that

I would have gone into that room again for Jamie even if it was st reeking of blood. I didn't see the familiar caves I walked through. I barely noticed that it was day I couldn't meet the eyes of any of the humans who stopped to stare at me. I could only put one foot in front of the other until I finally reached the hall way.

There were a few people clustered in front of the seventh cave. The sink screen was pushed far aside, and they craned their necks to see into Jared's room. They were an fam ar people I d considered friends. Jamie's triends, too. Why were they here? Was his condition so unstable that they needed to check on him of on?

"Wanda," someone said. Heid. "Wanda's here"

"Let her through " Wes said. He slapped Jeb on the back."

I wasked through the little group without woking at them. They parted for me, I might have walked right into them if they hadrit. I concentrate on anything but moving myse I forward

It was bright in the high-counged room. The room uselt was not crowded. Doe or lated had kept everyone out. I was vaguely aware of Jared, leaning against the far wall with his hands clasped behind him—a posture he assumed only when he was really worried. Doe knelt beside the highest where lany elay, just where I had reft him.

Why had I left him?

lamie's face was red and sweaty. The right leg of his jeans had been cut away, and the bandage was peeled back from his wound. It wasn't as hig as I diexpected. Not as horrible as I would have imagined. Just a two inch gash with smooth edges. But the edges were a trightening shade of red, and the skill around the cut was swoten and shiny.

"Wanda." Jamie exha ed when he saw me "Oh you're okay Oh." He took a deep breath.

I stilmbled and fell to my knees beside him, dragging lan down with mell touched lamic's face and felt the skin burn under my hand. My elhow brushed Does but I barely noticed. He scopied away but I didn't look to see what emotion was on his face, whether it was aversion or guilt.

"Jamie, baby, now are you?"

"Stupid" he said grinning "Just plain stupid Can you be reveithes?" He gestured to his leg. "Ot an the luck."

I found a wet rag on his pallow and wiped it across his forehead

"You're going to be fine "I promised. I was surprised at hew fierce my voice sounded.

"Of course It's nothing. But Jared wouldn't let me come talk to you." His face was suddenly anx ous. "I heard about — and Wanda, you know !..."

"Shh Don't even think of it. It I d had any idea you were sick I would have been here sooner."

"I'm not really sack, Just a stupid intection. I'm glad you're here, though I hated not knowing how you were."

I couldn't swallow down the lump in my throat. Monstere My Jamie? Never

"No I heard you schooled Wes the day we got back." Jamie said, changing the subject with a wide grin. "Man, I wish I could have seen that! I bet Melame loved it "

"Yes, she did "

"She okay? Not too worried?"

"Of course she's worned," I murmured, watching the Joth travel across his forehead as if it were someone else's hand moving it

Melanie

Where was she?

I searched through my head for her familiar voice. There was nothing but silence. Why wasn't she here? familias skin was burning where my fingers brushed it. The feel of it that unwholesome heat should have had her in the same panie. I was feeling.

"You okay?" lamic asked. "Wanda?"

"I'm cired jamic I'm sorry I'm just out of it"

He eved me carefully "You don't look so good"

What had I done?

"I haven't cleaned up in a winle,"

"I'm fine, you know You should go eat or something You're pale,"

"Don't worry about me"

"I'll get you some food," Ian said: "You hungry, k.de".

"Ah no. not really "

My eyes flashed back to lamic, Jamie was always hungry.

"Send someone else " I told lan gropping his hand righter

"Sure " His face was smooth, but I could sense both surprise and worty. "Wes could you get some food? Something for James too. I'm sure he II find that appetite by the time you get back."

I measured lamie's face. He was flushed, but his eyes were bright. He would be okay for a few manates. It left him here.

"Jame, do you mind if I go wash my face? I feel sort of grimy."

He frowned at the false note in my voice "Course not"

I pulled Ian up with me again as I rose. "I'll be right back. I mean it this time."

He smiled at my weak joke.

I telt someone's eyes on me as I left the room. Jared's or Doc's. I didn't know I didn't care.

Only lets still stood in the hallway now the others had gone, reassured, perhaps, that Jamie was doing okay Jub's head tilted to the side, currous, as he tried to figure out what I was doing. He was a approach to see me leave Jamie's side so soon and so abrupted. He also, had heard the sham in my excuse.

I burried past his inquisitive gaze, towing lan with me.

I dragged lan back through the room where the tunnels to all the ining quarters met in a big tangle of openings. Instead of keeping on lowerd the main plaza, I palled him into one of the dark corridors, picking at random. It was deserted

"Wanda, what "

"I need you to help me. Ian " My voice was strained framic

"W hatever you need. You know that "

I put my hands on either side of his face, staring into his eyes. I could barely see algunt of their blue in the darkness.

"I need you to kiss me, Ian Now Please"

Forced

an's jaw fell slack. "You what?"

"I'll explain in a minute. This isn't fair to you, but prease.

Just kiss me."

"It won't upset you? Melanie won't bother you?"

"Ian." I complained, "Please "

Still confused, he put his hands on my waist and pulled my body against his. His face was so worried I wondered if this would even work. I hardly needed the romance, but maybe he did.

He closed his eyes as he leaned toward me, an automatic thing. His ups pressed lightly against mine once, and then he pulled back to look at me with the same worried expression.

Nothing.

"No. What's wrong? Tell me first "

I put my arms around his neck. It telt strange. I wasn't at all sure

how to do this right. I pushed up on my toes and puned his head down at the same time until I could reach his ups with mine.

This wouldn't have worked with another species. Another mind wouldn't have been so easily overwhelmed by its body. Other species had their priorities in better order. But lan was human, and his body responded.

I shoved my mouth against his, gripping his neck tighter with my arms when his first react on was to hold me away. Remembering how his mouth had moved with mine before. I tried to mimic that movement new. His tips opened with mine, and I feit an odd thrill of triumph at my success. I caught his lower lip between my teeth and heard a low wild sound break from his throat in surprise.

And then I didn't have to try anymore. One of Ian's hands trapped my face, while the other clamped around the small of my back, holding me so close that it was hard to pull a breath into my constricted chest. I was gasping but so was he. His breath mingled with mine. I feet the stone wall rough my back, press against it. He used it to bind me even closer. There was no part of me that wasn't feed to part of him.

It was just the two of us so close that we hardly counted as two.

Just us:

No one else

Alone.

Lan felt it when I gave up. He must have been waiting for this—not as entirely ruled by his body as I J imagined. He eased back as soon as my arms went amp, but kept his face next to mine the tip of his nose touching the tip of mine.

I dropped my arms, and he took a deep breath. Slowly he toosened both his hands and then piaced them lightly no my shoulders.

"Explain," he said.

"She's not here," I was spered still breathing in gasps. "I can't find her, Not even now."

"Melante?"

"I can't hear her. Ian how can I go back in to Jam er He II know that I'm lying! How can I tell him that I've tost his sister now? Ian, he's sick! I can't tell him that I'll upset him, make it harder for him to get well. I —"

Ian's fingers pressed against my lips. "Shh, shh. Okay. Let's think about this. When was the last time you heard her?"

"Ob, Ian It was right after I saw in the hospital. And she tried to defend them and I screamed at her and I — I made her go away. And I haven't heard her since I can't find her."

"Shb" he said again "Calmiy Okay Now, what do you really want? I know you don't want to upset Jamie, but he's going to be fine regardless. So, consider—would it be better, just for you, if "

"No! I can't erase Melanie. I can't. That would be wrong! That would make me a monster, too!"

"Okay, okay" Okay Shh. So we have to find her?"

I nodded argently.

He took another deep breath "Then you need to really be overwhelmed, don't you?"

"I don't know what you mean"

I was afraid I d.d, though.

Kissing Ian was one thing—even a pleasant thing maybe if I wasn't so racked with worry—but anything more—elaborate. Could Iz Mel would be furious if I used her body that way. Was that what I had to do to find her? But what about Ian? It was so gross younfair to him.

"I be right back," lan promised "Stay bere"

He pressed me against the wall for emphasis and then ducked back out into the hallway

It was hard to obey I wanted to follow him, to see what he was doing and where he was going. We had to talk about this, I had to think a through But I had no time Jamie was waiting for me, with questions that I couldn't answer with nes. No, he wasn't waiting for me he was waiting for Melanie. How could I have done this? What it she was really gone?

Met Mei, come back. Meiante Jamte need, you. Not me... he need, you. He's sick, Mei. Mei, can you bear that? Jamte is sick.

I was ta king to myself. No one heard.

My hands were frembling with fear and stress. I wouldn't be able to wait here much longer. I for thise the anxiety was going to make me swell until I popped.

Finally, I heard footsteps. And voices. Ian wasn't alone. Confusion swept through me

"Just think of it as ___ on experiment," Ian was saving.

"Are you crazy?" Jared answered. "Is this some sick jok. -"

My stomach dropped through the floor

Overwhelmed That s what he a meant

Blond burned in my face hot as Jamie's fever. What was Ian doing to me? I wanted to run, to hide somewhere better than my last hiding place, somewhere I could never ever be tound no matter how many hash, ghis they used. But my legs were shaking, and I couldn't move.

Ian and Jarcel came into view in the room where the tunnels met Jan's face was expressionless, he had one hand on Jareel's shoulder and was guiding him, almost pushing him forward, lared was staring at Jan with anger and doubt.

"Through here." Ian encouraged, forcing Jarod toward me. I flat tened my back against the rock

lared saw me saw my mort flug express on and stopped

"Wanda, what's this about?"

I threw Ian one blazing glance of reproach and then tried to meet Jared's eyes.

I con do t do it. I looked at his feet instead.

"I lost Melanie," I whispered

"You lost her!"

I nodded miserably

His voice was hard and angry "Liow?"

"Importance I made her be quiet but she always comes back always before I can't bear her now and Jamie."

"She's goner" Mared agany in his voice

"I don't know. I can't find her"

Deep breath. "Why does Ian think I have to k ss you?"

"Nor kiss me" I said, my voice so taint I could barely hear it myself. "Kiss her. Northing appet her more than when you kissed us before. Nothing pulled her to the surface, ike that. May be No. You don't have to I listry to find her myself."

I still had my eyes on his feet so I saw him step toward me

"You think, if I kiss her . . . ?"

I couldn't even nod. I tried to swallow.

Famular hands brushed my neck tracing down either side to my shoulders. My heart thidded and enough that I wondered if he could hear it

I was so embarrassed, forcing aim to touch me this way. What if he thought it was a trick — my idea, not lank?

I wondered if Ian was still there watching. How much would this burt him?

One hand continued, as I knew it would, down my arm to my wrist leaving a trul of fire behind it. The other cupped beneath my aw as I knew it must and pulled my face up.

His check pressed against mine, the skin burning where we were connected, and he whispered in my ear

"Me ame. I know you're there. Come back to me."

His cheek slowly slid back, and his chin third to the side so that his mouth covered mine.

He tried to kiss me softly. I could tell that he tried. But his intentions went up in smoke just I ke before

There was fire *everywhere*, because *be* was everywhere. His hands traced my skin burning it. His lips tasted every inch of my face. The trick wall stammed into my back, but there was no pain. I couldn't feel anything besides the burning.

My hands knotted in his hair pulting him to me as if there were any possible way for as to be closer. My legs wrapped around his waist, the wailing me the leverage I needed. His tongue twisted with mine, and there was no part of my mind that was not invaded by the insone desire that possessed me,

He pulled his mouth free and pressed his ups to my ear again

"Melante Stryder." It was so loud in my ear, a growl that was almost a shout. "You will not leave me. Don't you love me. Prove it. Prove it. Damn. t. Me.! Get back here!"

His lips attacked mine again.

Alabbi sae groaned weakly in my head.

I couldn't think in greet her I was on fire.

The fire burned its way to her back to the tiny currier where she drooped, nearly lifeless

My hands fisted around the fabric of Jared's T shirt, yanking it up. This was their idea. I didn't tell them what to do. His hands burned on the skin of my back.

lareat she whispered. She tried to orient herself, but the total we shared was so disoriented.

I telt the muscles of it is stomach under my palms, my hands croshed between us.

What? Where Melanie struggled

I broke away from his mouth to breathe, and his ups scorched their way down my throat. I buried my face in his hair inhaling the scent

Jared! Jared! NO!

Let her flow through my arms knowing this was what I wanted, though I could barely pay attention now. The hands on his stomach turned hard langery. The fingers clawed at his skin and then shoved him as hard as they could.

"NO " she shouled through my aps.

Jared caught her hands, then caught me against the wall before I could tall. I sagged my body confused by the conflicting directions it was receiving.

"Mel? Me.1"

"What are you doing?"

He groaned in relief. "I knew you con didn't! Ab, Me.!"

He kissed her again kissed the lips that she now controlled, and we could both taste the tears that ran down his face.

She bit him.

Jared jumped back from as and I slid to the floor landing in a wifted heap

He started at ghing "That's my girl You said got her Wandar"

"Yes," I gasped.

What the ben Wandar she screeched at me.

Where have you been! Do you have any mea what I ve been going through trying to find you?

Year I can see that you were realty suffering

Ob. 1 It suffer. I promised her I could already teel it coming on. Just like before . .

She was flipping through my thoughts as fast as she could. Jamie?

That's what I've been trying to tell you. He needs you

Then why aren't we with him?

Because he's probabily a bullyoting to watch this kind of thing

She searched through some more. Wate, Inn. too. I'm gida I missed that part

I was so worried. I diwn't know what to do

Well, c'mon Let's go.

"Mel?" Jared asked.

"She's here. She's furious. She wants to see Jamie."

Jared put his arm around me and helped me up. "You can be as mad as you want, Mell Just suck around."

How long was I gone?

Three agys is ail

Her voice was suddenly smaller. Where was I

You don't know?

I can't remember . . . anything.

We shuddered

"You okay?" Jared asked

"Sort of."

"Was that her before ita king to me — ta king out loud?"

"Yes."

"Can she can you let her go that now?"

I sighed. I was already exhausted. "I can iry " I closed my eyes.

Can you get pass mer I asked her. Can you talk to him?

I ... How? Where?

I tried to flatten myself against the its de of my head. "C'mon," I murmured. "Here."

Mclante struggled. Lat there was no way out.

Jared silps came down on mine hard. My eyes flew open in shock His gold-flecked eyes were open, too, half an inch away

She jarked our head back "Cut that our Don't touch her!"

He smiled, the bit e creases teathering out around his eyes. "Hey, baby."

Ibat's not funny.

I tried to breathe again. "She's not laughing."

He left his arm around me Around is. We walked our into the takine, unclion and there was no one there. No lan

"I'm warning you. Me." Jared sold, still smiling widely. Teasing, "You better stay right here. I'm not making any guarantees about what I will or won't do to get you back."

My stomach fluttered

Tell him I il throtile him if he touches you like that again. But her threat was a joke, too.

"She's threatening your ite right now." I told him "But I Junk she's being facetious."

He laughed, giddy with relief "You're so serious at the time, Wanda."

"Your jokes aren't fanny" I muttered. Not to me.

Jared laughed again

Ah, Melanie said You are suffering

I'll try not to let Jamie see

Thank you for bringing me back.

I want erase you, Melante I'm sorry I can't give you more than that Thank you.

"What's she say ng?"

"We're just ... making up."

"Why couldn't she talk before when you were trying to let her?"

"I don't know Jared There really isn't enough room for both of us I can't seem to get myself out of the way completely it's like not I ke holding your breath. Like trying to pause your heartheats. I can't make myself not exist. I don't know how."

He didn't answer and my chest throbbed with pain. How joytu, he would be if I come figure out how to crase myself.

Me an elwanted to into to contradict me but to make me feel better she struggled to find words to soften my agony. She couldn't come up with the right ones.

But lan would be devistated Ana Jamie Jeh would miss you You have so many friends here

Thanks

I was glad that we were back to our room now I needed to think about something else before I started crying. Now wasn't the time for self-pity. There were more important issues at hand than my heart, breaking yet again.

Frenzied

imagined that from the outside. I looked as still as a statue. My hands were folded in front of me, my face was without expression, my breath ng was too shallow to move my chest.

Inside. I was spinning apart, as if the pieces of my atoms were reversing polarity and blowing away from one another

Bringing Mclanie back had not saved him. All that I could do was not enough.

The hall outside our room was crowded. Jarred. Ky e. and Ian were back from their despetate raid empty handed. A cooler of ice—that was all they had to show for three days of risking their lives. Trudy was making compresses and laving them across Jamie's forehead, the back of his neck, his chest.

Even if the ice cooled the fever raging out of control how long until it was at melted. An hour? More? Less? How ong until he was dying again?

I would have been the one to put the see on him, but I couldn't move if I moved, I would fall into microscopic pieces

"Nothing?" Doc murmured "Did you check - "

"Every spot we could think of " Kyle interrupted. "It's not like paintmers, drugs—lots of people had reason to keep those haden. The antibiotics were always kept in the open. They regone. Doc."

Jared just stared down at the red-faced child on the bed, not speaking,

Ian stood beside me "Don't look like that," he whispered "He il pull through. He's tough."

I couldn't respond. Cou dn't even bear the words, really,

Docknelt beside Trudy and pulsed Jamie's thin down. With a bowl he scooped up some of the ice water from the cooler and let it trickle into Jamie's mouth. We all heard the thick, painful sound of Jamie's swallowing. But his eyes didn't open.

I telt as though I would never be able to move again. That I would turn into part of the stone wall. I wanted to be stone.

If they dog a hote for famile in the empty desert, they would have to put me in it, too.

Not good crough. Meanie growled

I was despairing but she was filled with fury.

They tried.

Trying somes nothing famile will not die They have to go back out

For what purpose? Even if they did find your old antibiotics, what are the chances they would still be any good? They only worked half the time anyway. Interior. He doesn't need your medicine. He needs more than that. Something that ready works

My breathing sped up, deepened as I saw to

He needs mine, I realized.

Mel and I were both awestruck by the obviousness of this idea. The simplicity of it.

My stone lips cracked apart. "Jamie needs real medicines. The ones the souls have. We need to get him those."

Doc frowned at me "We cont even know what those things do. how they work."

"Does it matter?" Some of Melante's anger was seeping into my voice. "They do work. They can save him."

Jared stared at me. I could feel lan's eyes on me. too, and Kyle's, and all the rest in the room. But I saw only Jared

"We can't get em Wanda," Jeb said his tone already one of deteat Giving up. "We can only get into deserted places. There's a ways a bunch of your kind in a hospital. Twenty-tour hours a day. Too many eyes. We won't to Jamie any good if we get caught."

"Sure" Kyle said in a hard voice. "The centipedes will be only too happy to heal his body when they find us here. And make him one of them. Is that what you're after?"

I turned to g are at the big sneering man. My body tensed and leaned forward. Ian put his hand on my shoulder as if he were holding me back. I didn't hink I would have made any aggressive move toward Kyle, but maybe I was wrong. I was so far from my normal self-

When I spoke my voice was dead even, no inflection. "There has to be a way,"

Jared was nodding "Maybe someplace small. The gun would make too much noise, but if there were enough of us to overwhelm them, we could use knives."

"No." My arms came unfolded my hands falling open in shock "No. That's not what I meant. Not killing..."

No one even listened to me. Jeb was arguing with fared

"There's no way, kid Somebody diget a call off to the Seekers. Even if we were in and out something like that would bring iem down on us in force. We'd be hard-pressed to make it out at all. And they difollow?"

"Wait Can t you - "

They still weren't listening to me

"I don't want the boy to die, either but we can't risk everyone's ves for one person," Ky e said. "People die here it happens. We can't get crazy to save one boy"

I wanted to choke him to cut off his air in order to stop his calm words. Me, not Melanie I was the one who wanted to turn his fact purple. Melanie telt the same way, but I could tell how much of the violence came directly from me

"We have to save him." I said, louder now

Jeb looked at me "Hon we can trust walk in there and ask "

Right then another very simple and obvious truth occurred to me

"You can't. But I can."

The room fell dead silent.

I was caught up in the beauty of the plan forming in my nead. The perfection of it. I spoke mostly to myself, and to Melanie. She was impressed. This would work. We could save Jamie.

"They aren't suspicious. Not at all. Even it I'm a hornble, at they would never suspect me of anything. They wouldn't be listening for lies. Of course not I'm one of them. They would do anything to help me. I'd say I got hart hiking or something—and then I'd find a way to be a one and I'u take as much as I could hide. Think of it' I could get ellough to heal everyone here. To ast for years. And Jamie would be fine. Why didn't I think of this before? Maybe it wouldn't have been too late even for Walter."

I looked up then, with shirting eyes. It was list so perfect

So perfect, so absolutely right so obvious to me, that it took me forever to understand the expressions on their faces. If Kyle's had not been so explicit, it might have taken me tonger.

Hatred Suspicion, Fear.

Even Job's poker face was not enough. His eyes were tight with mistrust

Every face said no.

Are they insome . Can , they see box, this would help its al. .

They don't believe me. They it aik I'll burt them, nurt James

"Please " I whispered "It's the only way to save him "

"Patient isnit it?" Ky e spit "Bideo its time well don't you think?" I fought the desire to choke him again.

"Doc?" I begged.

He didn't meet my eves "Even if there was any way we could let you outside Wanda — I just couldn't trust drugs I don't understand. Jamie's a tough kid. His system will fight this off."

"We'll go out again Wanda." Ian murmured, "We find some thing. We won't come back until we do."

"That's not good enough." The tears were pooling in my eyes. I tooked to the one person who might possibly be in as much pain as I was "Jared You know You *know*, would never to anything hart Jamie, You know I can do this Please."

He met my gaze for one long moment. Then he looked around the room at every other face, leb. Doc. Kyle, lan, Trudy, chat the door at the silent audience whose expressions mirrored Kyle's. Sharon

Violetta Lucina Reid, Geoffrey, Ficath, Heid. Andy. Aaron, Wes. Lily Caro. My friends mixed in with my enemies all of them weating Kyle's face. He stared at the next row which I couldn't see. Then he cooked down at Jamie. There was no sound of breathing in the whole from.

"No, Wanda," he said quietly "No."

A sigh of relief from the rest

My knees buckled. I tell forward and vanked free of lans hands when he ared to pull me back up I crawfed to lamte and pushed Trudy aside with my elbow. The silent room watched. I took the compress from his head and rufilled the melled (ce. I didn't meet the stares I could feel on my skin. I couldn't see anyway. The reads swam in front of my eyes.

"Jamie Jamie Jamie," I crooned "Jamie Jamie Jamie."

I couldn't seem to do anything but sob out his name and touch the packets of ice over and over, waiting for the moment they would need changing.

I heard them leave is few at a time. I heard their voices, mostly angry, fade away down the halfs. I couldn't make sense of the words, though.

Jamie Jamie, Jamie.

"Jamie, Jamie, Jamie . . . "

Ian knelt beside me when the room was almost empty

"I know you wouldn't but Wanda, they'll kill you if you try," he whispered "After what happened in the hospital They're afraid you have good reason to destroy as Anyway, he il be all right You have to trust that "

I turned my face from him, and he went away

"Sorry, k d," Jeb mumbled when he lett

Jarea left I dian't hear him go, but I knew when he was gone. That seemed right to me. He didn't love Jamie the way we did. He had proved that He should go.

Doe stayed watching he plessly I didn't look at him.

The dayl ght faded slowly, turned orange and then gray. The ice melted and was gone Jamie started to burn adve under my hands.

"Jamie Jamie, Jamie." My voice was cracked and hoarse now, but I couldn't stop, "Jamie, Janie Jamie."

The room turned black I couldn't see Jamie's face. Would be leave in the night? Had I already seen his face, his living face, for the last time?

His name was just a whisper on my ups now low enough that I could hear Doc's quiet snoring

I wiped the tepal cloth across his body without ceasing. As the water dried it cooled him a lattle. The burn lessened. I began to betteve that he wouldn't die tonight. But I wouldn't be able to hold him here forever. He would sup away from me. Tomorrow. The next day. And then I would die too. I would not live without Jamie.

Jamie Jamie Jamie Melanie groaned

Jured dian t believe us. The lament was both of ours. We thought it at the same time.

It was still slient. I didn't hear anything. Nothing aierted me

Then suddenly Dockmed out The sound was oddly muffled, like he was shouting into a pillow.

My eyes couldn't make sense of the shapes in the Jarkness at first. Doc was serking strange y. And he seemed too big. Like he had too many arms. It was territying I leaned over Jamie's mert form, to protect him from whatever was happening. I could not flee while he lay helpless. My heart pounded against my ribs.

Then the flaming arms were still Doos snote statted up again, louder and thicker than before. He sumped to the ground, and the shape separated. A second figure pulled uself away from his and stood in the darkness.

"Let's go." Jared whispered. "We don't have time to waste."

My heart nearly exploded

He believes

[tamped to my feet, forcing my stiff knees to unbend. "What did you do to Doe?"

"Chioroform. It won't last long."

I turned quick 9 and poured the warm waler over Jamie soaking his clothes and the mattress. He didn't stir Perhaps that would keep him cool until Dot woke up.

"Follow me."

I was on his needs. We moved sciently, almost touching a most running but not quite, lared hugged the walls, and I did the same He stopped when we reached the light of the moon bright garden room. It was deserted and still.

I could see Jaredic early for the first time. He had the gun slung behing his back and a knife sheathed at his waist. He held but his hands and there was a length of dark fabric in them. I understood at once

The whispered words raced out of my mouth. "Yes, bundfold me."

He nodded, and I closed my eves while he tied the cloth over them.

I would keep them closed anyway.

The knot was quick and tight. When he was done if span myself in a fast circle once twice

His hands stopped me "That's okay," he said. And then he gripped me harder and theo me off the ground. I gasped in surprise as he threw me against his shoulder. I tolded there my head and ches, hanging over his back, beside the gain. His arms held my legs against his chest, and he was already moving. I bounced as he jogged my see brushing against his shirt with each stride.

I had no sense of which way we were going. I didn't try to guess or think or feel. I concentrated only on the bouncing of his gait counting steps. Twenty, twenty, the twenty-two, twenty-three.

I could feel him lean as the path took him down and then up. I tried not to think about it

Four hundred twelve four hundred thatteen four hundred fourteen

I knew when we were out I smelled the dry clean breeze of the desert. The air was not though it had to be close to interright

He pulled me down and set me on my feet

"The ground is flat. Do you think you can run bundfolded?"
"Yes."

He grabbed my elbow trafit y in his hand and took off, setting a rigorous pace. It wasn't last He caugh, me time and time again before. I could last I started to get used to it after a white and I kept my ballance better over the timy pits and rises. We ran until we were both gasping.

"If we can get to the jeep we in bein the clear."

The jeep of test a strange wave of nostangia. Mel hadn't seen the

eep since the first leg of that disastrous trip to Chicago, badait known it had survived

"If we .. can't?" I asked.

"They catch us they I kit you. Iams right about that part."
I thied to run toster. Not to save my life but because I was the only one who could save Jamie's I stumbled again.

"Going to take off the blindfold You libe faster"

"You sure?"

"Don't ... look around 'Kay-"

"Promise."

He yanked at the knots behind my head. As the fabric fell away from my eyes. I tocused them only on the ground at my feet

It made a world of difference. The moonlight was bright, and the sand was very smooth and paie. Jared dropped his arm and broke into a faster stride. I kept up easily now. Distance tunning was familiar to my body. I settled into my preferred stride. I ist over a six more termio, I it guess. I couldn't keep up that pace forever, but I'd run myself into the ground trying.

"You hear, , anything?" he asked.

I listened. Just two sets of running feet on the sand

"No."

He grunted in approva.

[g resect this was the reason be α stolen the gun. They couldn't stop us from a distance without it.

It took about an hour more 1 was slowing then, and so was he My mouth burned for water

I'd never looked up from the ground, so a startled me when he put his hand over my eyes. I fa tered, and he pulled us to a walk

"We're okay now. Just ahead "

He left his hand over my eyes and tagged me forward. I heard our footsteps echo off something. The desert wasn't as flat here

"Get in."

His hand disappeared,

It was nearly as dark as it was with him covering my eyes. Another cave Not a deep one. If I turned around. I would be able to see out of it. I didn't turn

The teep faced into the darkness. It tooked just the same as I remembered it it is vehicle I had never seen. I swiing myself over the door into the seat

Jated was in his seat a ready. He leaned over and ned the blandfold over my eyes again. I held still to make it easier.

The noise of the engine scarce me. It seemed too dangerous. There were so many people who shouldn't find us now

We moved in reverse briefly, and then the wind was blasting my face. There was a funny sound behind the jeep, something that didn't fit Melanie's memories.

"We're going to Tucson," he told me. "We never raid there—it's too close. But we don't have time for anything else. I know where a small hospital is, not too deep into town."

"Not Same Mary's?"

He heard the alarm in my voice "No. why?"

"I know someone there"

He was quiet for a minute "Will you be recognized?"

"No No one will know my face. We don't have a wanted people. Not like you did."

"Okay."

But he had me thinking now thinking about my appearance. Before I could voice my concerns, he took my hand and folded a around something very small.

"Keep that close to you."

"What is it?"

"If they guess that you're—with us, if they re going to—put someone else in Mel's body, you put that in your mouth and bite down on it hard."

"Poisone"

"Yes."

I thought about that for a moment. And then I laughed, I couldn't help it. My nerves were frayed with worry

"It's not a toke. Wanda," he said angrily. "If you can't do it, then I have to take you back."

"No, no I can " I tried to get a hold of myself. "I know I can. That's why I'm laughing."

His voice was hars.1 "I don't get the joke"

"Don't you see? For moons of my own kind I've never been able to do that Not for my own challen I was always too atraid to die that final time. But I can do it for one alien child." I laughed again "It doesn't make any sense. Don't worry though I can die to protect Jamie."

"I'm trusting you to do just that."

It was shell for a moment, and then I remembered what I tooked like.

"Jared I don't look right. For walking into a hospita."

"We've got better clothes stashed with the less-conspicuous vehicles. That's where we're headed now About five more minutes."

That wasn't what I meant but he was right. These clothes would never do I waited to talk to him about the rest. I needed to look at myself first.

The leep stopped, and he puiled oft the blandfold

"You don't have to keep your eyes lown," he rold me when my head ducked automatically "There's northing here to give us away Just in case this place was ever discovered."

It wasn't a cave. It was a rock so do. A few of the bigger boulders had been carefully excavated feaving clever dark spaces under them that no one would suspect of housing anything but clirt and smaller rocks.

The jeep was a ready longed in a tight space. I was so close to the rock. I had to a limb over the back of the jeep to get out. There was something odd attached to the bumper. I chains and two very duriy tarps, all ragged and torm.

"Here." lared said, and led the way to a shadow's crevice just a little shorter than he was. He or is led as de a dusty dirt colored tarp and rifled through a pile hiding behind it. He polled out a T shirt soft at diclean, with tags still at ached. He ripped those off and threw the s. Into me. Then he dug until he found a pair of knake pants. He checked the size, then flipped them to me. too.

"Put them on."

I hesitated for a moment while he waited, wondering what my problem was I flushed and then turned my back to 1 m. I vanked my ragged shirt over my head and replaced it as quickly as my fambling fingers could manage.

I heard him clear his throat "Oh III lih, get the car" H's foot steps moved away.

I stripped off my tattered cutoff sweats and pulled the crisp new pants into place. My shoes were in bad shape, but they weren't that noticeable. Besides, comfortable shoes weren't always easy to come by I could pretend I had an attachment to this pair.

Another engine came to life quieter than the jeep's. It irrned to see a modest unremarkable sedan pur out of a deep shadow under a both der Jared got out and the ned the tattered tarps from the jeep to this car's rear bumper. Then he drove it to where I stood, and as I saw the heavy tarps wipe the tire tracks from the dirt. I comprehended their purpose.

lated leaned across the seat to open the passenger door. There was a backpack on the seat. It lay flat, empty I needed to myself. Yes, this I needed.

"Lets go."

"Hold on," I said

I crouched to look at myself in the side mirror

Not good. I flipped my chinnength hair over my cheek, but it wasn't enough. I touched my cheek and hit my lip.

"Jared I can't go in with my face Ke this." I pointed to the long, jagged scar across my skin.

"What?" he demanded.

"No sold would have a scar like this. They would have bad it treated. They II wonder where I've been. They illust questions."

His eyes widened and then narrowed. "Maybe you should have thought of this before I snuck you out. If we go back now they in think it was a proy for you to learn the way out."

"We're not going back without it ediline for Janue." My voice was harder than his

His got harder to match it "What do you propose we do then, Wanda?"

"I need a rock " I sighed. "You're going to have to hir me."

Healed

"We don't have rime I dido it myself, but I can't get the angle right. There's no other way."

"I don't think I can ... do it."

"For Jamie levene" I pushed the good side of my face as hard as I could against the headrest of the passenger seat and closed my eyes

Jared was holding the rough fist-sized stone I difound. He'd been weighing it in his band for five minutes.

"You have to get the first tew layers of skin off. Just hille the scar that's all. C'mon, larece we have to burry Jamie."

Tell turn I saw to do it note. And make it a good one

"Mel says do it now. And make sure you do it hard abought Get it all the first time."

Silence

"Do n, Jared!"

He took a deep Ereath is gasp. I test the air move and squeezed my eyes tighter

It made a squishing sound and a third—that was the first thing I noticed—and then the shock of the blow wore off and I felt it too.

"I ngh" I groated I had it meant to make any sound. I knew that would make it worse for him But so much was involuntary with this body. Icors sprang up in my eyes, and I coughed to hide a sob. My head rang, vibrated in aftershock.

"Wenda? Mel? I'm sorry!"

His arms wrapped around us. pared as into as chest

"Sokay," I whimpered "We're okay Dio you get it all?"

. Its hand touched my than turned my head

"Abb" he gasped, sickened. 'I took half your tace off I'm so sorry"

"No, that's good. That's good. Let's go."

"Right" His voice was stru weak, but he leaned me back, but my seat settling me carefully, and then the car rumbled beneath us

Les cold air biew in my face, shocking me, stringing my raw cheek. I d'forgotten what air conditioning feit like

I opened my eyes. We were driving down a smooth wash smoother than it should have been, carefully altered to be this way it stacked away from us, coiling around the brush I couldn't see very far ahead.

I pulled the visor down and flipped open the marror. In the shadowy moonlight, my face was black and white Black an across the right sade obzing down myich of dripping across my neck and seeping into the court of my new, clean shirt.

My stomach heaved.

"Good job," I whispered,

"How much pain are you m?"

"Not much" I sed "Anyway, a wont hurt much longer How tar are we from Tucson?"

Instituten, we reached pavement. Funny now the sight of it made my heart race in panic. Jured stopped, keeping the car hidden in the bright. He got out and removed the tarps and chains from the bumper putting them in the trink. He got back in and eased the car forward checking carefully to make sure it ein ghway was empty. He reached for the headlights,

"Watt," I whispered I couldn't speak louder. I felt so exposed here "Let me drive."

He looked at me.

"It rank look like I wasked to the hospital, ke this. Too many questions. I have to drive. You hide in the back and tell me where to go. Is there something you can hide under?"

"Okay," he said slowly. He put the car into reverse and pulled it back into the deeper brush "Okay I is hide. But if you take us somewhere I don't tell you to go..."

Ch. Meianie was stung by his doubt, as was I

My voice was flat "Shoot me."

He didn't answer. He got out, leaving the engine running. I stid across the cup ho ders into his seat. I heard the trunk stam.

Jared climbed and the backscat a thick plate blanket under this arm

"Turn right at the road," he said.

The car was an automatic, but it had been a long time and I was ansure betyind the wheel. I moved ahead carefully pleased to had that I remembered how to drive. The highway was still empty. I put ed out onto the road, my heart reacting to the open space again.

"Lights," [ared said. His voice came from low on the bench.

I searched till I tound the switch, then flicked them on They seemed horribly bright.

We weren't far from Tucson I could see a verowish glow of color against the sky. I've Lights of the city ahead

"You could drive a little faster."

"I'm right at the limit," I protested.

He paused for a second. "Souls don't speed?"

I laughed. The sound was only a tad hysreneal. "We obey all laws, trathe laws included."

The ghts became more than a glow — they turned into individual points of brightness. Green signs informed me of my exit options

"Take Ina Road."

I followed his instructions. He kept his voice low though, enclosed as we were, we could both have shouled.

It was hard to be in this unfamiliar city. To see bouses and apart

ments and stores with signs lit up. To know I was surrounded our numbered. I imagined what it must fee, like for Jared. His voice was remarkably calm. But he didone this before, many times.

Other cars were on the road now. When their lights washed my windshield, I cringed in terror,

Don't fan apart now Wanda You have to be strong for Jame. This won't work if you can't do that

I can. I can do it

I concentrated on Jamie, and my hands were steadler on the wheel lated directed my through the mostly sleeping city. The Healing facility was just a small place. It is still have been a medical bounding once—doctors' offices, rather than an actual hospital. The lights were bright through most of the windows, through the glass front. I could see a woman behind a greeting desk. She didn't look up at my heading its. I drove to the darkest corner of the parking lot.

I slid my arms through the straps of the backpack. It wasn't new but it was in good shape. Perfect. There was just one more thing to do

"Quick, give me the knife."

"Wanda I know you love Jamie but I reads don't think you could use it. You're not a fighter."

"Not for them Jared I need a worned."

He gasped "You mive a wound. That's enough?"

I need one like Jamie's I don't know enough about Healing, I have to see exactly what to do I would have done it before but I wasn't sure I'd be able to drive."

"No, Not again."

"Give it to me now Someone will notice if I don't go inside soon."

Jared thought it through quirily. He was the best, as Jeb had said because he could see what had to be done and do it fast. I heard the steely sound of the knife coming out of the sheath.

"Be very careful. Not too deep."

"You want to do it?"

He inhaled sharply "No."

"Okay."

I ook the tight kin feld that a heavy handle and was very sharp in came to a topered point at the tip

I don't let myself think about it. I dian't want to give myself a

chance to be a coward. The arm, not the leg in that's all I paused to decide. My knees were scarred, I didn't want to have to hide that too

I held my left arm out my hand was shaking. I braced it against the door and then twisted my head so that I could but down on the head-test. I like dithe knote's handle awkwardly but tightly in my right hand. I pressed the point against the skin of my forearm so I wouldn't miss. Then I closed my eyes.

Jared was breathing too hard I had to he fast or he would stop me.

Just pretend it's a shove-opening the ground. I told myse t

I jammed the knife into my arm

The headrest muffled my scream but it was still too loud. The knite fer from my hand—jerking sickeningly out from the muscle and then clunked against the floor.

"Wanda!" Jared rasped.

I couldn't answer yet. I tried to chake back the other screams I left coming. I a been right not to do this before driving.

"Let me see"

"Stay there," I gasped "Don't move"

I heard the blanket rustling behind he despite my warning. I put led my left arm against my body and yanked the door open with my right hand Jared's hand brushed my back as I half tell out the door It wasn't a restraint. It was comfort

"I'll be right back." I coughed out, and then a kacked the door shut behind me.

I stambled across the lot fighting nausea and panic. They seemed to balance each other out—one keeping the other from taking control of my body. The pain wasn't too bad—or rather if couldn't feet it as much anymore. I was going into shock. Too many kinds of pain, too close together. Hot liquid rolled dewn my fingers and dripped to the pavement. I wondered if I could move those fingers. I was afraid to try

The woman behind the reception desk — middle aged, with dark chocolate skin and a few sliver threads in her black hair — jumped to her feet when I lurched through the mi omatic doors

"Oh no Oh, dear " She grabbed a microphone and her next words echoed from the ceiling, magnific I "Heater Knits" I need you in reception! This is an emergency!"

"No " I tried to speak calmly, but I swayed in place. "I'm okay Just an accident."

She put the microphone down and hurried around to where I stood swaving. Her arm went around my waist

"Oh, honey, what happened to you?"

"So care ess." I muttered. "I was hiking. — I tell down the rocks was a cleaning up after dinner. A knife was in my hand..."

My hesitations seemed like part of the shock to her. She didn't look at me with suspicion—or humor, the way Ian sometimes did when I lied. Only concern.

"You poor dear! What's your name?"

"Glass Spires." I too, her using the rather generic name of a herd member from my time with the Bears.

"Okay Glass Spires. Here comes the Healer. You i be fine in just a moment."

I didn't feel panicked at a sovmore. The kindly woman patted my back. So gentie, so caring. She would never harm me.

The liteauer was a young woman. Her hair, skin, and eves were a distinuar shade of ght brown it made her unusual looking—thonochromatic. She were tan scrubs that only added to that impression.

"Wow," she said "I'm Healer Knits Fire Til get you fixed up directly What happened?"

I told my story again as the two women led me down a hall way and then through the very first door. They had me we down on the papercovered bed

The room was fam far I d been in only one place like this, but Melanie's chudhood was his of such memories. The short row of double cabinets, the sink where the Fica er was washing her hands, the bright, clean white walls

"First things first." Knits Fire said cheerfally. She pulled a cabinet open. I tried to locas my eyes, knowing this was important. The cabinet was fall of rows and rows of stacked white cylinders. She took one down reaching for it without searching she knew what she wanted. The small container had a label, but I couldn't read it. "A little no pain should help, don't you think?"

I saw the label again as she twisted the lid off. Two short words. No Pain? Was that what it said?

"Open your mouth, Giass Spires."

1 obeyet. She took a small, thin square—it looked like ussue paper—and laid it on my tongue. It dissolved at once. There was no flavor. I swallowed automatically

"Better?" the Healer asked.

And it was Already My my bead was clear —I could concentrate without difficulty. The pain had melted away with the tiny square Disappeared I blinked, shocked.

"Yes."

"I know you feet full now, but please don't move. Your antaries are not treated yet."

"Of course."

*Carulean, could you get us some water. Her mouth seems dry "

"At once Healer Knits."

The older woman left the room

The Healer airned back to her cabanets opening a different one this time. This too, was filled with white containers, "Here we are." She pulsed one from the top of a stack, then took another from the other side.

Almost as it she were trying to help me faifill my mission, she listed the names as she reached for them.

"Clean inside and out Heal Seal And where is ah, Smooth Don't want a scar on that pretty face do we?"

"Ah ... no."

"Don't worry You is be perfect again."

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome "

She learned over me with another white cy, naer. The top of this one came off with a pop, and there was an acrosol spray nozzle under neath. She sprayed my forearm first, coating the wound with clear, odorless mist.

"Healing must be a fit filling profession." My voice sounded list right. Interested, but not unumly so "I haven't been in a Healing facility's necessarition. This is very interesting." "Yes Take it." She started spraying my face

"What are you doing now?"

She smiled I guessed that I was not the first curious sou. "This is Clean It will make sure not ring foreign stays in the wound. It kills off any of the microbes in at might infect the wound."

"Clean," I repeated to myself

"And the Inside Caean just in case anything has smack into your system. Inhale this, please "

She had a different white by inder in her hand, alth inner bottle with a pump rather than an across, top. She puffed a cloud of mist into the air above my tace. I sucked in a breath. The mist fasted, ke mint

"And this is Heal," Knirs Fire continued its string the cap off the next call ster revealing a small pouring spout. "It encourages your tissues to rejoin its grow the way they should."

She do blied a tiny but of the clear inquidums the wide cut on my arm then she prished the edges of the wound toget for I could feel her touch, but there was no pain.

"I'll seal this up hefore I move on " She opened another container, this one a pliable tube and then squeezed out a line of thick, clear jelly onto her tinger "Like give" she told me. "It holds everything together and less the Heaf de its job." She wiped it over my arm in one swift pass "Okay you can move that now Your arm is fine."

I held it up to look. A faint pink line was visible under the saling ge. The blood was still wet on my arm, but there was no source any more. As I watered, the Healer cleaned my skin with one quick pass of a damp towel.

"Turn your face this way please. Hmm, you must have hit those rocks fust exactly wrong. With a mess."

"Yes. It was a bad fall."

"We trank goodness you were able to Jrive yourself here."

She was lightly dripping Heal onto my cheek, smearing it with the tips of her fingers. "An I love to watch it work. Looks much better afready Okay—around the edges." She smalled to herself. "Maybe one more coat. I want this to be erased." She worked for a minute longer. "Very nice."

"Here's some water" the older woman said as she came through the door

"Thank you, Cerulean."

"Let me know if you need anything more 141 be up front."

"Thanks."

Connean left. I wondered if she was from the Flower Planet. Bute flowers were rare. One might take a name from that

"You can sit now How do you feel?"

I pulled myself up "Perfect." It was true. I hadn't felt so healthy in a long time. The sharp shift from pain to ease made the sensation more powerful.

"That's just how it should be Okay, jets dust on a little Smooth."

She twisted the last cylinder's top and shook an indescent powder into her hand. She parted it into my cheek, then parted another hand ful onto my arm

"You always have a small the on your arm," she said apologetically. "Like your neck. A deep wound. If She shrugged Absentin indeed y, she brushed the bair back from my neck and examined the scar. "This was nicely done. Who was your Health?"

"I'm Faces Sunward," I said, pulling the name from one of my old students. "I was in Eureka Montana I didn't like the cold I moved south."

So many ues. I telt a twist of anxiety in my stemach

"I started out in Maine," sae said, not noticing anything amiss in my voice. As she spoke, she cleaned, he blood from my neck. "It was too coal for me, too. What's your Callings."

"tim I serve food in a Mexican restaurant in Phoenix I like spacy food."

"Me too" She wasn't took ng at me fanny She was wiping my theek now

"Very nice. No wornes. Glass Spires. Your face looks great."

"Thank you, Healer."

"Of course. Would you ke some writer?"

"Yes please" , kept a grip on myse-filt wouldn't do to bolt the glass down the way I wanted to I wasn't able it stop myself from finish $n_{\rm B}$ thin though It taked look grow

"Would you like more?"

"I yes, that world be nice. Thank you."

"I II be right back."

The second she was out the door I sud off the mattress. The paper crack ed freezing me in place. She didn't dart back in I had only seconds. It had taken Certhean a few minutes to get the water. Maybe it would take the I tealer just as long. Maybe the cool, pure water was far away from this room. Maybe.

I ripped the pack off my shoulders and wrenched the drawstrings open. I started with the second cabinet. There was the stacked column of Heal. I graphed the whole column and let it clatter quiet vinto the bottom of my pack.

What would I say if she caught me? What he could I to, ?

I took the two kinds of Clean next, from the first cabinet. There was a second stack behind the first of each, and I took half of those, too. Then the No Pain, both stacks of that I was about to turn back for the Scall when the label of the next row of cylinders caught my attention.

Coor For fevers? There were no instructions, just the label. I took the stack. Nothing here would hart a hi man body. I was sure of that

I graboed all the Seal and two cans of Smooth. I couldn't press my luck any further. I closed the cabinets quietly and threw my arms through the straps of the pack. I leaned against the mattress, making another crackle. I tried to look relaxed.

She didn't come back

I checked the clock. It had been one minute. How far away was the water?

Two minutes.

Three minutes

Had fix lies been as obvious to her as they were to mer

Sweat started to dew up on it's forehead. I wased it away quickly.

What if she brought back a Seeker-

I thought of the small pill in my pocket and my hands shook. I could do it, though For Jamie.

a heard goiet footsteps then, two sets from ng down the hall

Succeeded

caler Knits I re and Cerulean walked through the door toge her The Flea er handed me a tall glass of water. It could teel as do d as the first — my fingers were cold with fear now. The dark-skinned woman had something for me, too. She handed me a flat rectangle with a handle.

"I thought you would want to see," Knits Fire said with a warm smile

The tension flouded out of me. There was no suspicion or fear Just more kindness from the souls who had dedicated their lives to Healing.

Cerulean had given me a mirror.

I held it up and then trick to stifle my gosp

My face looked the way I remembered it from San Diego. The face I ditaken for granted there. The skin was smooth and peachy across my right cheekbone. If I looked carefully, it was just a little lighter and plinker in color, han the tan on the other cheek.

It was a face that belonged to Wanderer the sou. It belonged here, in this divided place where there was no violence and no horsor.

I realized why it was so easy to be to these gentle creatures. Because it felt right to talk with them because I anderstood their communication and their ries. The les could be maybe shown be true. I should be filling a Calling somewhere, whether teaching at a university or serving food in a restaurant. A peaceful easy, to contributing to a greater good.

"What do you to pk?" the Healer asked.

"I look perfect. Thank you."

"It was my pleasure to heal you."

I looked at myself again, seeing details beyond the perfection. My hair was ragged to dirty, with uneven ends. There was no gloss to it homemade soap and poor nutrition were to blame for that Though the blook had cleaned the blook from my neck. It was still smudged with purple dust.

"I think its time I cause the camping trip quits. I need to clean up," I mormored

"Do you camp often?"

"In all my free time lately I can't seem to keep away from the desert."

You must be brave. I find the city much more comfortable."

"Not brave -- just different,"

In the mirror my eves were fam har rings of hazel. Dark gray on the outside, a circle of moss green, and then another circle of caramel brown around the pap. I inderlying it all a faint summer of silver that would reduce the light magnify it

lamie. Mel asked argently beginning to feel nervous. I was too comfortable here. She could see the logic of the other path, aid out before me, and that frightened her

I know who I am, I told her

I be need then looked back at the friendly taces beside me

"Thank you " I saw again to the Heiler "I suppose I d better be on my way."

"It's very late. You could neep here it you dlike."

"I'm not tired. I feel . . . perfect,"

The Healer grinned "No Pain does that "

Cerulean walked me to the reception area. She put her hand on my shoulder as I stepped through the door.

My heart beat taster. Had she noticed that my pack, once flat, was now bulging?

"Be more careful dear" she said, and paited my arm.

"I will. No more bikes in the dark."

She smiled and went back to her desk

I kept my pace even as I walked through the parking lot. I wanted to run. What it the Healer locked in her cabinets? How soon would see real ze why they were half coupty?

The car was sturthere, in the pocket of darkness created by a gap between street ghts. It looked empty. My breath came fast and on even. Of course it should mok empty. That was the whole point. But my langs dion t calm until I could glimpse the vague shape under the blanket on the backseat.

I opened the door and plot the backpack on the passenger seat — it settled there with a reassuming clatter — then I counted in and shut the door. There was no reason to stam the locks down. I ignored the urge.

"Are you okay?" Jared whispered as soon as the door was closed. His voice was a strained anxious rasp

"Shh " I said keep ng my lips as st... as I could "Wait"

I drove past the bright entrance and answered Cerulean's wave with one of my own

"Making friendsr"

We were on the dark road. No one was watching me anymore. I slumped in the seat. My hands started to shake. I could allow that now that it was over. Now that I discloseded.

"All soms are triends." I told him lusing my normal volume

"Are you all rights" he demanded again.

"I'm heared."

"Let me see."

I stretched my left arm across my body so he could see the urly pink line,

He sucked in a surprised breath

The blanker rustled he sat up and then elimbed through the space between the seats. He pushed the backpack out of the way, then pulled it onto his lap, testing its weight.

He looked up at me as we passed under a street amp, and he gasped,

"Your face"

"It's healed too. Naturally."

He is sed one hand, holding it in the sir near my cheek, ansure "Does it hurt?"

"Of course not. It feels like nothing happened to it in the first place."

His fingers brushed the new skin. It ting ed. but that was from his touch. Then he was back to business.

"Did they suspect anythings Do you think they'll call the Seekers?"

"No. 1 told you they wouldn't be suspicious. They didn't even check my eves 1 was hurt, so they healed me." I shrugged

"What did you get?" he asked open ng the drawstrings on the backpack

"Their ght things for Jamie I if we get back in time." I glanced at the clock on the dashboard automatically though the hours it marked were meaningless. "And more for the future. I only took what I understood."

"We be back in time," he promised. He examined the write containers, "Smooth?"

"Not a necessity Bot I know what it does, so "

He housed, digging through the bag. He mattered the names to himself. "No Pains Does it work?"

I at ghee. "It's amazing If you stab yourself I could show you.

That's a joke."

"I know"

Fig. was staring at me with an expression I dignit understand. His eyes were wide I we something had deeply surprised him.

"What?" My joke hadn't been that bad.

"You did it." If s tone was full of wonder

"Wasn't that the idea?"

"Yes but I guess I didn't really think we were going to make it out."

"You didn't? Then why - ? Why did you let me try?"

He answered in a soft almost whisper. "I figured it was better to use trying than to live without the kid."

For a moment, my throat was choked with emotion. Mel was too overcome to speak as well. We were a family in that one instant. All of as

I cleared my throat. No need to feel things that would only come to nothing.

"It was very easy Probably any of you could get away with it, if you acted naturally. She did look at my neck." I touched it reflexively. "Your scar is too obviously homemade, but with the medicines I took. Doe could fix that."

"I doubt any of us could act so natural "

I noctded "Yes It's easy for me. I know what they expect." Laughed briefly to myself "I m one of them. If you trusted me, I could probably get you anything in the world you wanted." I laughed again. It was just the stress fading, making me giddy. But it was funny to me. Due he tealize that I would do exactly that for him? Anything in the world he wanted.

"I do trust you." he wh spered "With all our lives. I trust you."

And he has trusted me with every single hi man are. His, and Jamie's, and everyone else's

"Thank you," I wrispered back.

"You did it," he repeated in wonder.

"We're going to save him."

Jamie is going to live Mel resorced Thank you, Wanted

Amything for them. I told her and then I sighed because it was so true

After restraching the tarps when we reached the wash, Jared rook over the draving. The way was familiar to him, and he drove faster than I would have. He had me get out before he pulled the car into its impossibly small hiding place under the rock's de-I waited for the sound of rock against metal, but lared found a way of

And then we were back in the jeep and flying through the night Jared laughed, triamphant, as we joited across the open desert, and the wind carried his voice away.

"Where's the blindfold?" I asked.

"Why?"

Hooked at him

"Wanda if you wanted to turn us in you had your chance. No one can deny that you're one of us now."

I thought about that "I think some still could. It would make them fee, better"

"Your some need to get over themselves."

I was shaking my head now puturing our reception. "It's not going to be easy getting back in Imagine what they're thinking right now. What they're waiting for ..."

He didn't answer His eyes narrowed.

"Jared if they if they don't listen if they don't wait." I started tailing taster feeling a sudden pressure trying to get him all the information before it was too late. "Give Jamie the No Pain first lay that on his tongue. Then the Ins. de Clean spray he just has to inhale it. You'll need Doc to —"

"Hey hey" You're going to be the one giving the directions."

"But let me tet! you how ---"

"No. Wanda It's not going to go down that way I'll shoot anyone who touches you."

"Jared -- "

"Don't partie I is aim low, and then you can use that stuff to heal 'em back up again."

"If that's a joke, it's not fumpy"

"No joke, Wanda."

"Where's the bundfold?"

He pressed his lips together

But I had my old shirt — Jeb's raggy hand me-down. That would work almost as well

"This will make it a little bit easier for them to let us in." I said as I folded it up into a thick band. "And that means getting to Jamie faster." I ned it over my eyes.

It was quiet for a time. The feep bounced along the uneven fer role. I remembered hights like this when Meianic had been the passenger.

"I'm taking as right to the caves. There's a place the jeep will be fairly well hilden for a day or two 1, will save as time."

I nodded. Time was the key now.

"Almost there" he said after a minute. He exhaled: "They rewaiting."

I heard him fumb, ng beside me heard a meta, clarik as he pulled the gun from the backseat

"Don't shoot anyone."

"No promises."

"Stop" someone shouted. The sound carried in the empty desert air

The jeep slowed and then idled

"It's just us," Jared said. "Yes, yes, look See- I'm stir, me."

There was hesitation from the other side

"I ook I'm bringing the jeep in inder cover okay? We've got meds for Jamie, and we're in a hurry. I don't care what you're Jimking, you're not going to get in my way conight."

The jeep pulsed forward. The sound changed and echood as he found his cover

"Okay Wanda everythings fine Let's go."

I already had the pack on my shoulders. I got out of the jeep carefully not stite where the wall was fared laught my scarching hands.

"I p you go," he said, and afted me over his shou der again.

I wasn't as secure as before. He used only one arm to no dime. The other must have had the gun. I didn't like that

But I was worried enough to be grateful for it when I heard the running footsteps approaching.

"Jared, you idiot " by e shouted "What were you thinking?"

"Ease up, Kyle," Jeb said

"Is she burt?" Ian demanded.

"Get out of my way." lared said, his voice cam. "I'm in a harry Wanda's in perfect shape, but she insisted on being be adtolded. How is lamie?"

"Hot," Jeb said.

"Wanda's got what we need." He was moving fast now sading downfull.

"I can carry her." Ian, of course.

"She's fine where she is."

"I'm rea by okay," I told Ian my yo ee hot noing with Jared's movement

Uphill again, als easty jog despite my weight. I could hear the others running with us,

I knew when we were through to the mail, cavern—the angry hiss of voices swelled around us, turning into a claimor of sound.

"Ou, of my way" Jared roared over their voices "Is Doc with Jamie?"

I couldn't make out the answer lated could have put me down but he was in too much of a hurry to pause for that second

The angry voices echoed behind as the sound constructing as we entered the smaller tained. I could feel where we wore now, tobow the turns to my head as we raced through the junction to the third sleeping has all could almost count toe doors as they passed me toy sthay

Jared jerked to a hait and let the sudden stop slice me down from his shoulder. My teet hit the floor, He ripped the blandfold from my eyes.

Our room was it by several of the dim blue lanterns. Doc was standing rigidly as if he dilust sprung to his feet. Kneeling beside him ber hand still holding a wet cloth to famile's forehead was Sharon. Her face was a most unrecogn zahie it was so contorted with fury. Maggie was strugg, ing to her feet on Jamie's other side.

lam e st. lav impland red, eves c osed his chest barely moving to pull in air.

"You " Sharon spir and then she la inched herself from her crouch. Like a cut, she sprang at Jared mails reaching for his tace.

lared caught her hands and twisted her away from him pulling her arms behind her back

Maggie moked as if she was about to oin her daughter but Jeb stepped around the struggling Sharon and Jared to stand toe-to-toe with her

"Let her go." Doc cried.

Jared ignored him "Wanda heal is in "

Dot moved to put himself between Jamie and me

"Doc " Lehoked. The violence in the mom, swirling around Jamie's still form, scared me. "I need your help. Please. For Jamie."

Doc Jaint move his eyes on Sharon and Jared

"Cmon, Doc." Ian said. The little room was roo crowded, claustrophobic, as Ian came to stand with his hand on my shoulder. "You gonnallet the kid die for your pride?"

"It's not pride. You don't know what these foreign substances will do to him?"

"He can't get much worse, can he?"

"Doe," I said. "Look at my face."

Doc wasn't the only one who responded to my words, Jeb. Ian and even Maggie looked and then did a dot but take. Maggie glanced away quickly, angry that she u betrayed any interest.

"Haw?" Doc demanded

"I'm show you. Please Jamie doesn't need in suffer "

Doe hes tated staring at my tace, and then let out a big sign. "lates right—the can't get much worse. It this kins him......." He shrugged, and his shoulders slumped. He took a step back.

"No," Sharon cried

No one paid any attention to her

I knelt beside Jamie, yanking the backpack off my shoulders and tugg, ig it open. I timbled until I found the No Pain. A bright light switched on beside melipointed at Jamie's tacc.

"Water, lan?"

I twisted the his open and pinched out one of the latte tissue squares. When I placed Jamie's thin down his skin burned my hand I laid the square on his tongue and then held out my hand without looking up. Ian placed the bow, of water in it.

Carety visit pped enough water into his mouth to wash the meditine down his throat. The sound of his swallow was dry and painful

I searched from really for the thinner spray bottle. When I bund it I had he lid off and the mist sprayed into the air above him in one fast movement. I wanted watching a sichest until he inhaled.

I touched his face, and it was so hot I scrambled for the Cool, praying it would be easy to use. The adiscrewed off and I found that the eyalider was full of more tissue squares, light place this time. I breathed a sight of relief and placed one on Ia mestong ie. I picked up the bowl again and dribbled another mouthful of water through his parched lips.

His swa low was quicker this time less strained

Another hand touched lamie's tace if recognized Doc's long bony fingers.

"Doc, do you have a sharp knife?"

"I have a scarpel. You want me to open the wound?"

"Yes, so I can clean it"

"I thought about trying that to drain it but the pain.

"He'll feel nothing now"

"Look at his tace." Ian leaned in bestor me to whisper

Jam'e's face was no longer red. It was a natural healthy tan. The sweat still glistened on his brow, but I knew it was just left over from before. Doc and I touched his forchead at the same time.

It's working. Yes. Exultation swept through both Me, and me

"Remarkable," Doc breathed.

"The fever has cooled out the infection may remain in his leg. Heip me with his wound, Doc."

"Sharon could you hand me —" he began absenting indeally. Then he looked up "Oh. Ah. Kyle, do you mind handing me that bag right there by your foot?"

I scooted down so that I was over the red, swo, en out I an red rected the light so I could see it clearly. Doc and I both rustled through out bags at the same time. He came up with the silver sea per a sight that sent a quiver of unesse down my spine. I ghored it and rescied the bigger Clean spray.

"He won't feel it?" Doc checked hesitating.

"Hev" Jamie croaked. His eyes were open wide iroaming the room until they found my face. "Hev, Wanda. What's going on? What's everyone doing here?"

Encircled

amic started to sit up

"Easy there kid How you been "I an moved to press Jamie's shoulders against the mattress.

"I fee, really good. Why is everyone here? I don't remember. "

"You ve been sick. Hold still so we can finish fixing you."

"Can I have some water?"

"Sure, kid. Here you go."

Doc was starting at Jamie with disheloving eyes

I could barely talk my throat was so tight with joy. "It's the No Pain." I muttered "It feels wonderful."

"Why does Jared have Sharon in a head.ock?" Jam.e whispered to Ian.

"She's in a bad mood," Ian stage whispered back

"Hold very still Jamie" Doc cautioned. "We're going to lean out your injury. Okay?"

"Okay," Jamic agreed in a small voice. He dinoticed the sculpel in Doc's hands. He eyed it wantly.

"Tell me if you can fee, in s." Doc said

"It at harts " I amended.

With practiced skill. Doc said the scalpel gently through the diseased skin in one swift movement. We both granted at lamie. He was starting straight up at the darkice. Ing.

"That feels weird " Jamie said, "But it doesn't hurt."

Doe nodded to himself and brought the scalper down again, making a cross of tilRed blood and dark yellow discharge obzed from the gash

As soon as Doc's hand was clear I was spraying Clean back and forth across the bloody X. When it hit the obzing secretion the unhealthy yellow seemed to sizzle shortly. It began to receive Almost like suds hit by a spray of water. It moved Doc was breathing fast beside me

"Look at that"

I sprayed the area twice for good measure. Already the darker red was gone from Jamie's skin. All that was left was the normal red color of the human blood that flowed out.

"Okay Hea." I muttered I found the right can ster and upped the attle spout over the gashes in his skin. The clear liquid trickled in, coating the raw flesh and gustening there. The bideding stopped wherever the Heal spread. I poured half the container — surely twice as much as was needed—into the wound.

"Okay, hold the edges together for me. Doe."

Dot was speech ess as this point, though his mouth hung wide. He did as I asked using two hands, o get both cuts.

Jamue laughed. "That tickles."

Doc's eyes bulged

I smeared Scal across the X -watching w th deep sansfaction as the edges fused together and laded to pink.

"Can I see?" Jamte asked

"Let him up, Ian. We're almost done."

Jamie paned himself up on his c bows, his eves bright and carious. His sweaty, dirty hair was maited to his head. It didn't make sense now next to the healthy glow of his skin.

"See I put this on "I said brushing a handful of glitter across the cuts, "and it makes the scar very fain. Like this "I showed him the one on my arm.

Jamie laughed. "But don't sears impress girls? Where aid you get this stuff, Wandar It's like magic."

"Jared took me on a raid."

"Senously? That's awesome"

Doc touched the gastening powder residue on my hand, then held his fingers to his nose.

"You shou I have seen her " Jared satu. "She was incredible "

I was surprised to hear his voice close behind me. I looked around for Sharon automatically and just eaught sight of the flame of her hair leaving the room. Maggie was right behind her

How said. How frightening. To be fulled with so much hate that you could not even rejoice in the hearing of a child. How did anyone ever come to that point?

"She wasked right into a hospital right up to the alien there, and asked them to treat her in uries, bold as anything. Then, when they turned their backs, she robbed them blind." Jared made it sound exciting famile was enjoying it too his smile was huge. "Walked right out of there with med time enough to last as all for a long time. She even waved at the bugger behind the counter as she drove away." Jared laughed.

I cou du . do this for them. Melame said, suddenly chagi ned. You're of more saids to them than 1 a outdine.

Hugh I said. It was not a time for sadness or calousy. Only joy I wouldn't be here to be pittern without you. You saved him, too

Jamle was staring at me with Lig eyes.

"It wasn't that excring really," I old him He took my hand, and I squeezed his, my heart swollen with grat rude and love. "It was very easy. I'm a bugger, too, after all."

"I d dn't mean - " Jared started to apologize

I waved his protest away, smiling

"How and you explain the scar on your face?" Doc asked "Didn't they wonder why you hadn't —"

"I had to have fresh injuries, of course I was careful to leave them nothing to be a specious about I told them I ditallen with a

anyone."

I was really flying high now Everything seemed to glow from inside—the fabrics, the faces, the very walls. The crowd inside and ourside the room had begun to military and question but that noise was fast a ringing in my ears—late the fingering sound after a bell is struck. A shimmer in the air. Nothing seemed real but the little circle of people I loved. Jamie and Jared and Ian and Jeb. Even Dot be longed in this perfect moment.

"Fresh injuries?" Ian asked in a flat voice

I stated at him surprised at the anger in his eves

"It was necessary I had to hade my star And learn how to heaf Jamie."

Jared picked up my left wrist and struked his finger over the faint pink line a few metes above it. "It was normble " he said a " the hamor suddenly gone from his sober voice. "She about hacked her hand off I thought she'd never use it again."

Jamie's eyes widened in horror "You cut yourself?"

I squeezed his hand again "Don't be anxious" if wasn't that had. I knew it would be begied quick v."

You should have seen her? Jared repeated in a low voice still stroking my arm.

lans fingers brushed across my cheek. It feet not and I caned into his hand when he left it there. I wondered if it was the No Pain or just the joy of saving Jamie that made everything warm and glowing.

"No more raids for you." Ian marmured.

"Of course she li go out again," fured said his voice louder with surprise. "Ian she was absolutely phenomenal. You d have to see to really understand. I'm only just beginning to guess at all the possibilities.—"

"Possible ness" lans hand slid down my neck to my shoulder. He pulled me closer to his side laway from Jared. "At what cost to here You let her almost back her own band off?" His fingers flexed around the rop of my arm with his inflections.

The anger of drift belong with the glow. "No. Ian, it wasn't like that," I said, "It was my idea. I had to."

"Of course it was your idea." Ian growled. "You'd do anything.

You have no *limits* when it comes to these two. But Jared shouldn't have let you. -?

"What other way was there Tane" Tared argued "Did you have a better plane Do you think she dibe happier it she was unburt but Jamie was gone?"

I florched at the Indeous thought

Ian's voice was less hostile when he answered. "No But I don't understand how you could sit there and watch her do that to herself." Ian shook his head in a sgust, and lared's shortders hunched in response, "What kind of a man."

"A practical one," Jeb interrupted.

We all looked up Jeb stood over us, a bulky cardboard box in his soms.

"It's why fored a the best at getting what we need. Because he can do what has to be done. Even when watching's harder than doing.

"Now I know it's closer to breakfast chan supper our I figured some of you haven't caten to a while " Job went on changing the subject without subtlety "Hangry, ode".

"Uh Im not sure." Jamie admitted "I fee mai hor ow but it doesn't feel ... bud."

"That's tite No Pain "I said "You should eat "

"And drink," Due said. "You need "quies."

leb let the anwieldy box fall onto the matrices. "Thought we'm ght have a bit of a celebration. Dig in."

"Why yam " Jamie said pawing through the box of dehydrated mea s of the sort that hikers used. "Spaghern Excellent."

"Dibs on the gartic chicken" let said "I ve been missin gartic quire a bit — though I imagine no one misses it on my breath." He chickled.

Jeb was prepared with bothes of water and several portable stoves. People began to gather around, squeezing together in the small space. I was wedged between lared and lab, and I dipulsed Jamie onto my lap. Though he was much too old for this, he didn't protest. He must have sensed how much both of us needed that — Mel and I had to teel him alive and healthy and in our arms.

The shammening circle seemed to wide a enveloping the entire

late-night support party, making them family too. Everyone waited contentedly for Job to propage the unexpected treats, in no hurry. Fear had been replaced by relief and happy news. Even Ky e. compressed into the small space on the other side of his brother was not unwelled in the circle.

Meanie sighed in contentment. She was vibrantly aware of the warmth of the box in my lap and the touch of the man who still stroked his hand against my arm. She wasn't even upset by tank arm around my shoulders.

You're lecling the No Pain 100. I teased her I don't think it's the No Pain. Not for either of us No. you're right. This is more than I be ever had. This is so much of what I lost.

What was it that made this human love so much more desirable to me than the love of my own kind? Was it because it was excusive and capticular? The solus offered love and acceptance to al. Did I mave a greater challenge? This love was incky it had no hard-and-fast rules—it ought be given for free, as with family or earned through time and hard work as with fan, or completely and heartbreaklingly anattainable, as with Jared

Or was it simply better somehow? Because these humans could hate with so much turn was the other end of the spectrum that they could love with more heart and zeal and fire?

I do in the know why I had rearned after it so desperately. All I knew was that, now that I had it, it was worth every ownce of risk and agony it had cost. It was better than I duragined.

It was everything.

By the time the tood was prepared and consumed the late - or rather early — hor rinks gotten to us al. People stumbled out of the crowded room toward their acids. As they lett there was more space

Those remaining slouched down where we were as room became available. Gradually, we me red in place antil we were horizontal. My head ended up pillowed on Jared's stomach, his hand stroked my hair now and then. Jam'e's face was against my chest, and his arms were around my neck. One of my arms wrapped around his shoulders. Jam's head was cush ance on my stomach, and he held my other hand to his face. I could feel Doc's long ag stretched beside mine, his shoc by my

hip. Doe was asleep —I could bear him snoring. I may have even been touching Kyle somewhere.

Jeb was sprawled on the bed. He be ched, and Kyte chuckled.

"Nicer in ght than I was planning for Take it when pessing sm goes unrewarded." Jeb mused: "Thanks, Wanda."

"Mmm" I sighed, half asteep.

"Next time she raids..." Kyle said somewhere on the other's de of Jared's body. A big yown interrupted his sentence. "Next time she raids, I'm coming, too."

"She's not going out again," Ian answered, his body tensity. I brushed my hand against his face, trying to soothe him.

"Of course not "I marmared to him. "I don't have to go anywhere upless I'm needed. I don't mind staying in here."

"I'm not talking about keeping you prisoner Wanda" Iao explained, irritated "You can go anywhere you want as far as I'm concerned. logging on their ghway, it you'd like that But not a raid. I'm talking about keeping you safe."

"We need her," Jared said, his voice harder than I wanted to hear it.

"We got by fine without her before"

"Filter Jamie would have died wit louther. She can get things for us that no one clse can."

"She's a person, Jared, not a tool "

"I know that I didn't say that -- "

"S up to Wanda. I a say" Jeb interrupted the argument just as I was about to. My band was holding lan down now and I could feel Jared's body shifting under my head as he prepared to get up Jeb's words froze them in place.

"You can't leave it up to her Jeb." Jan profested.

"Why not? Seems like she's got her own in oid."S it your job to make decisions for her?"

"I li ted you why not " Ian ar imbled "Wandar"

"Yes, Jan?"

"Do you want to go out on raids?"

"If I can help, of course I should go."

"That's not what I asked, Wanda,"

I was quiet for a moment trying to remember his question to see how I'd gotten it wrong.

"See Jeby She never takes into account her own wants — fer own happiness, her own *hearth*, ever. She dido anything we asked her to even if it got her killed. It's not fair to ask her things the way we diask each other. We stop to think about ourselves. She doesnit."

It was quiet. No one answered Ian. The suence dragged on until I felt compelled to speak for myself.

"That's not true "I saw. "I think about myse thall the time. And I I wan to help. Doesn't that count? It made me so happy to be planted on ght. Can't I have happiness are way thwant to?"

lan sighed, "See what I mean?"

"We, . I can tell her she can't go it she wants to," Jeb said. "She's not a prisoner anymore."

"But we don't have to ask."

Jared was very quiet through a lithis. Jamic was quiet, too, but I was pretty sure he was asleep. I knew lared wasn't his hand was tracing random patterns on the side of my face. Glowing, burning patterns.

"You don't need to ask." I said. "I you nteer. It ready wasn't frightening. Not at a ... The other souls are very kind. I'm not atraid of them. It was almost too easy."

"Easy? Cutting your —"

I interrupted can quarkly "That was an emergency I won't have to do that again "I paused for a second "Right?" I checked

lan groaned. "It she goes. I'm going, too." he said in a h eas tone "Sameon: has to protect her from horse f."

"And I habt there to protect the rest of as from bur," Kyne said with a chackle. Then he grunted and said. "Ow."

I was too used to I it my head to see who had hit kyle now "And I'l, he diere to bring you all back a "ve." Jared murmured.

Employed

his is too easy. It's not really even fun anymore." Kyle com-

You wanted to come " Ian reminded him

He and Ian were in the windowiess back of the van, sorting through the nonperishable groceries and tonetries I'd is collected from the store. It was the middle of the day and the sun was shining on Wich ita. It was not as hot as the Arizona desert, but it was more humid. The air swarmed with tiny flying bugs.

Jared Jrove toward the highway out of town, carefully keeping below the speed limit. This continued to unitate him.

"Getting tires of shopping yet. Wandar" lan asked me

"No I don't mind it."

"You a ways say that Isn't there anything you mind?"

"I mind—being away from Jamie. And I mind being outside a little bit. During the day especially. It's like the opposite of a austrophodia. Everything is for open. Does that bother you too?"

"Sometimes. We don't go out during the day much "

"At least she gets to stretch her legs." Kyle muttered. "I don't know why you want to hear ber complain."

"Because it's so uncommon. Which makes it a nice change from listening to you complain."

I funed them out. Once Ian and Kyle got started, they usually went on for a while. I consulted the map

"Ok ahoma City next?" Tasked Jared

"And a few small towns on the way if you're i p for it?" he an swered, eyes on the road.

"I am."

Jared rare vilost his focus when on a raid. He didn't relax into relieved banter the way Ian and Ky e did every time I completed another mission successfully. It made me smile when they used that word mission. That sounded so form dathe. In reality, it was dist a trip to the store. Just like I'd done a hundred times in San Diego when I was only feeding myself.

Coccasionally, in the smaller towns, someone would notice me, would speak to me. I had my lines down so we that took diprobably have fooled a human by this point,

"Hi there New in town?"

"Yes Brand new"

"What brings you to Byers?"

I was always earet to check the map before I aft the van so the town's name would be familiar

"My pariner traveis a lot. He's a phosigrapher."

"How wondersu. An Ariss. West, there's certainty a not of heautiful land around here."

Originally I dibeen the Artist But I'd found that throwing in the information that I was already partnered saved my some time when I was speaking to males.

"Thunk you so much for your belp."

"You re very weicome Come back soon"

I'd only had to speak to a pharmacist once, in Sal. Lake City latter that, I'd known what to look for

A sheepish smile. "I'm not sine I in getting the right mitrition. I can't seem to avoid the junk food. This body has such a sweet moto."

"You need to be wise. I nonsand Perals. I know it's easy to give in to your cravings, but try to think about what you're easing. In the mean-time, you should take a supplement."

Health. Such an obvious tale on the bottle, it made me feel silly for asking

"Won a you like the ones that laste like strumberries or the ones that taste like chocolate."

"Coula Lary both?"

And the pleasant soul named Earthborn gave me both of the large bottles.

Not very challenging. The only fear or sense of danger I ever telt came when I thought of the small eyanide pill that I always kept in an easily reachable pocket. Just in ease

"You should get new clothes in the next town " Jared said

"Agam?"

"Those are looking a little creased."

"Okay." I agreed I daint like the excess but the steadily growing pile of dirty laundry wouldn't go to waste. Lily and He di and Paige were an close to my size and they would be grateful for something new to wear. The men rarely bothered with things like clothes when they were raiding. Every foray was life or death liciothes were not a priority. Nor were the gent e soaps and shampons that I dibeen collecting at every store.

"You should prohably clean up too." fared said with a sigh. "Guess that means a hotel tonight."

keeping up appearances was not something they a worried about be one Or course. I was the only one who had to look as if I were a part of civilization from close up. The men wore leans and dark I show now things that a dot show durt or attract attention in the brief moments they might be seen.

They all hated sleeping in the roads, defines — succumbing to unconsciousness invide the very main hot the enemy. It scared them more than anything else we said fan said he a rather charge an armed Seeker.

Kyle simply refused. He mostly slept in the van during the day and then sat up at right, acting as sentry.

I'm me it was as easy as shopping in the stores. I checked us in made conversation with the clerk. It ld the story about my photographer partner and the friend who was traveling with us last in case someone saw all three of us enter the room! I used general names from unremarkable planets. Sometimes we were Bars, Word Keeper Sings the Egg Song and Sky Roost. Sometimes we were See Weeds. Twisting tives, Sees to the Surface at discond Strings to trace of riparh. It ust names every time not that anyone was triving to trace of riparh. It ust made We are a feel safet to do that All this made her fee, I ke a character in a hi man move about espionage.

The hard part the part I really minded—not that I would say this in front of Kyle, who was so quack to doubt my intentions — was at the taking without giving anything back. It had never bothered me to shop in San Diego. I took what I needed and nothing more. Then I spent my days at the university giving back to the community by sharing my knowledge. Not a laxing the lang but one I took serior say I hok my turns at the less appearing chores. I did my day collecting garbage and cleaning streets. We all did.

A Jirow I rook so much more and gave nothing in return. It made me feel selfish and wrong

the not for voursely his for others. Me, reminded me when I broaded.

It fill he wring Feen you can fee thus can't your

Don't think about it was her solution

I was plad we were on the homestretch of our long raid. I confirm we would visit a ungrowing cache — a moving thick we kept hilden

within a day's reach of our path—and dean out the van for the last time. Just a few more cities, a few more days down through Oklahoma, then New Mexico, and then a straight drive through Arizona with no stops.

Home again. At last.

When we stept in horeis rather than in the crowded van, we usually checked in after dark and left before dawn to keep the souls from getting a good look at us. Not really necessary

Jared and Ian were beginning to realize that. This night because we'd had such a successful day. The van was completely full. By e would have attle space and because Ian thought I tooked tired we stopped early. The sun had not set when I returned to the van with the plastic key card.

The little inn was not very busy. We parked close to our room, and Jared and Ian went straight from the van to the room, in a matter of five or six steps, their eyes on the ground. On their necks, small, faint pink lines provided camous age. Jared carried a half empty suitcase. No one looked at them or me

Inside the room darkening curtains were drawn, and the men relaxed a attle bit.

Isn lounged on the sed he and Jared would ascland I pped on the TV Jared put the solicase on the table took out our dinner — cooled greasy breaded to cken strips I a ordered from the dot in the last store—and passed it around I sat by the window, peeking through the corner at the falling sun as I are

"You have to admit, Wanda, we b. mans had better entertainment,"

Ian teased

On the television screen, two souls were speaking their lines clearly, their bodies held with perfect posture. It wasn't hard to pick up what was happening in the story because there wasn't a lot of variety in the scripts souls wrote. In this one, two souls were reconnecting after a long separation. The male's stint with the See Weeds had come her tween them, but he'd chosen to be human because he guessed his partner from the Misis Planet would be drawn to these warm blooded hosts. And, miracle of mindes, he'd found her here.

They all had happy endings.

"You have to consider the intended audience"

"True I wish they dirun old himan shows again." He flipped through the channels and itowned. "I sed to be a few of them on."

"They were too disturbing. They had to be replaced with things that weren't so ... violent."

"The Brady Bunch?"

I la ghed I a seen that show in San Diego, and Melanie kilew it trom her childhood. "It condoned agyress on I remember one where a little male child punched a bully, and that was portraved as being the right thing to do. There was blood."

lan shook his head in dispellet that returned to the show with the former See Weed. He laughed at the wrong parts the parts that were supposed to be touching.

I started out the window watching something much more interesting han the predictable story on television.

Across the working mod from the line was a small park, bordered on one side by a school and on the other by a field where cows grazed. There were a few young trees, and an old fashloned playground with a sandbox a side a set of monkey bars, and one of those hand pulled metry gorrounds. Of course, here was a swing set, too, and that was the only equipment being used currently.

A attle tam, y was taking advantage of the cooler evening air. The father had some silver in his dark hair at the temples, the mether looked many years his unior. Her red brown hair was pelled back in a colleptory that bobbed when she moved. They had all the boy no more than a year out. The father pushed the stall in the swing from behind, while the mother stood in front, earling in to kiss his fore head when he swang her way, making him gragle so hard that his chab white face was high real. This had her laughting tho in I could see her body shake with their hair cancing.

"What are you staring at, Wanda?"

lared signes ion wasn't anytious, because I was set in a softly at the surprising scene.

"Some bing I've never seen in all my lives. I'm staring at hope."

area came to stand behind melipecking out over my shoulder "What do you mean?" It's eyes swept across the huldings and the road not parsing on the playing family

I can ght his whin and pointed his face in the right direction. He didn't so much as shoch at my unexpected touch, and that gave me a strange tout of warmth in the pit of my stomach. "Look " I said."

"What am I looking at?"

"The only hope for survival Tve ever seen for a host species"

"Where?" he pernanded bow ldered

I was aware of Ian close behind us now listening scendy

"See?" I permed at the laughing mother "See how she loves her human child?"

At that moment, the woman snatched her son from the swing and squeezed him in a hight embrace, covering his tace with kisses. He coold and flailed — just a bady. Not the miniature adult he would have been if he carried one of my kind.

Jaren, gasped. "The baby is buman? How? Why? For how long?"

I shrugged. "I we never seen this before - I don't know She has not given him up for a host. I can't magine that she would be forced. Motherhood is all but worshipped among my kind. If she is unwilling. "I shook my head. "I have no dea how that will be handled. This doesn't happen elsewhere. The emotions of these bodies are so much stronger than logic,"

I glanced up at Jarco and Ian. They were both staring openmouthed at the interspectes fam. v. n the park

"No." I murmured to myself. "No one would torce the parents if they wanted the child. And just *mok* at them."

The father had his arms around both the mother and the child now. He looked down at his nost body's biological son with staggering tenderness in his eyes.

"Aside from ourse ves, this is the first planer we've discovered with live boths. Yours certainly isn't the casiest or most pro-fic system. I wonder if that's the difference of a t's the hoppessness of your young Everywhere else reproduction is through some form of eggs or seeds. Many parents never even meet their young I wonder. "I trailed of my thoughts tell of spectration."

The mother afted her face to her partner and he kissed her ips. The human child crowed with benght

"Himm Perhaps, someday, some of my kind and some of yours will live in peace. Wou don't that be stranger."

Neither man could tear his eyes from the miracle in from of them

The family was leaving. The mother dusted the sand off her leans while the father took the boy. Then, helding hands that they swung between them, the souls strolled toward the apartments with their haman child.

Ian swallowed roudly.

We didn't speak for the rest of the evening, all of us made thought fail by what we'd seen. We went to skeep early so we could rise early and get back to work.

I stept alone. In the bed farthest from the Joor. This made me an comfortable. The two big men did not fit easily on the other bed. Ian tended to sprawl when he was deeply asteep, and fared was not above throwing puncties when that happened. Both of them would be more comfortable if I shared I slept in a small ball now maybe it was the too-open spaces. I moved in a liday that had me constricting in on myse flat right or maybe I was last so used to carring up to sleep in the time space behind the passenger seat on the vans floor that I did torgotten how to sleep straight.

But I know why no one asked me to share. The first night the men had unhapping realized the necessity of a hotel shower for me I d heard lab and Jared talking about me over the what of the path room fan.

not fair to ask her to choose "lan was saving. He kept his voice low but the fan was not joud enough to drown it out. The hotel room was very small.

"Why not? It's fairer to tell her where she's going to sleep? Don't you think it's more police—"

"For someone else. But Wanda will agon ze over this. She in be trying so hard to picase as both, she'll make herself miscrabie."

"Jealous again?"

"Not this time I is, know how she things."

There was a silence Ian was right. He did know how I thought He a probably already to reseen that given the slightest hint that lared would preter it. I would choose to sleep heade lared, and then keep mysel awake worrying that I'd made Jared unhappy by being there and that I d hart lans feelings in the bargoin.

"Fine," Jared snapped: "But if you try cuduing up to me tonight so help me, O'Shea."

Ian chackled. "Not to sound overly arrogant, but to be perfectly honest, Jared, were I so inclined. I think I could do better."

Despite fee inglaintrie gruty about wasting so much needed space. I probably did sleep better alone

We didn't have to go to a hotel again. The days started to pass more quickly, as it even the seconds were trying to run home. I could feet a strange westurn pull on my body. We were all eager to get back to our dark, crowded haven.

Even Jared got careless.

It was late, no surlight left in gering behind the western mountains. Behind us, Ian and Kyle were taking turns arriving the big moving truck loaded with our sports, just as Jared and I took turns with the van. They had to drive the heavy venicle more carefully than lared did the van. The headlights had taded slowly into the distance until they disappeared around a wide curve in the road.

We were on the homestretch. Tucson was behind as. In a few short hours. I would see famile. We would unload the welcome provisions, surrounded by smiting taces. A real homecoming.

My first, I reanzed

For once the return would bring nothing out joy. We carried no doomed hostages this time

I wasn't paying attenion to anything but anatopation. The road didn't seem to be flying by too fast, it couldn't fly past fast enough as far as I was concerned.

The truck's headlights reappeared behind us.

"Kyle must be driving." I murmured. "They re-eatthing up."

And then the red and base lights suddenly span out in the dark night behind us. They reflected off a the mirrors dancing spors of color across the roof, the scats our frozen faces, and the dashboard, where the needle on the speed gauge showed that we were traveling twenty miles over the speed limit.

The sound of a stren pierced the desert caim.

Detained

he red and blue aghts swittled in time with the sirens cry
Before the some had come to this place, these lights and sounds
had had only one meaning. The law the keepers of the peace, the
punishers of offenders.

Now, again, the flashing colors and angry noise had only one meaning. A very similar meaning. Still the buntshers

Seekers.

It wasn't as common a sight or sound as it had been before. The police force was only needed to help in cases of accidents or other emergencies, not to enforce laws. Most civil servants durit have vehicles with strens to less the vehicle was an ambiliance or a fire truck.

This low sleek car behind is was not for any accident. This was a vehicle made for pursuit. I'd never seen anything quite like it before but I knew exactly what it means

Jared was frozen, his foot still pushing down on the gas peda. I

could see that he was trying to find a solution, a way to outrun them in this decrepit van or a way to evade them—to hide our wide while profile in the low gaunt brush of the desert—without leading them back to the rest. Without giving everyone away. We were so close to the others now. They slumbered, unaware

When he gave up after two seconds of frantic thought he exhaled

"I'm so sorry, Wanda," he whispered "I blew it."

"Jared?"

He reached for my hand and eased up on the gas. The car started to slow

"Got your pall?" he choked

"Yes," I whispered.

"Can Mel bear me?"

Yes The thought was a sob

"Yes." My voice only parely escaped being a sob. too.

"I love you, Mel. Sorry."

"She loves you. More than anything."

A short aching silence.

"Wanda, I — I care about you, too. You're a good person. Wanda. You deserve betier than what I we given you. Better than this."

He had something small, much too small to be so deadly, between his fingers.

"Wan," I gasped.

He could not die.

"Wands, we can't take the chance. We can't outrun them, not in this if we try to run, a thousand of them will swarm after as. Think of Jamie,"

The van was slowing attifting to the shoulder

"Give me one try." I begged. I fumbled quickly for the pill in my pocket. I pinched it between my thumb and forefinger and held it up. "Let me try to le us out of this. I a swa low it right away if anything goes wrong."

"You il never he your way past a Secker!"

"Let me try Quick!" I pulled off my seat belt and crouched beside him unfastiming his. "Switch with the Tast, before they to close enough to see." "Wanda —"

"One try. Hurry."

He was the best at split second decisions. Smooth and fast, he was not of the driver's scat and over my crouched hody. I roued up into his seat while he took mine.

"Scar bett" I ordered terse v "Close your eyes. I in your head away."

He did as I said. It was too dark to see it but his new soft pink scar would be visible from this angle.

I strapped my sear best on and then leaned my head back

Lying with my body that was the key. It was simply a matter of the right movements. Imitation I ke the acrors on the TV program only better. Like a human

"Help me, Mel," I murmured

I can't help you be a perfer som. Wanta Bu, you can do this Save him. I know you can

A better soul. I only had to be myself

It was late I was fired I wou do't have to act that part.

Her my eye has droop let my body sag against the seat

Chagnin I could do chagrin I could begut now

My mouth turned down into a sheepish grimace

The Seckers car did not park behind as, the way I could feel Me expected It supped across the road, on the shoulder facing the wrong way for that lands trathe flow. A dazzling I got exploded through the window of the other car. I olimized into a raising my hand to shade my face with deliberate slowness. Fainly, past the giare of the sportight, I saw the gleam of my eyes bot noe against the road as I looked down.

A car door stammed. One set of thotsteps made a pattern of low thods as someone crossed the pavement. There was no sound of dirt or rocks, so the Seeker had emerged from the passenger side. Iwo of them, at least, but only one coming to interrogate me. This was a good sign, a sign of comfort and confidence.

My glowing eyes were a talisman. A compass that could not tallie the North Star, undoubtable

Lying with my hour was not the key. To ling the truth with it was enough. I had something in common with the human baby in the park not unglike me had ever existed before.

The Seeker's body blocked the light and I could see again

It was a man. Probably modell, aged—this features conflicted with one another making it hard to tell his hair was a white but his face was smooth and unwrinkled. He wore a Tish it and shorts, a blocky gun clearly visible on has hip. One hand rested on the butt of the weapon. In his other hand was a dark flashlight. He didn't turn a on

"Having a problem, miss?" he said when he was a few feet away.
"You were going mich too fast for safety."

His eyes were restless. They swittly appraised my expression—which was hopefully sleepy—and then ran along the length of the vair, darried into the darkness behind as flashed forward to the stretch of highway ahead. In by our headinghts, and came back to my face. They repeated the course another time.

He was anxious. This knowledge made my paints sweaty, but I tried to keep the panic from my voice.

"I'm so sorry "I apologized in a loud whisper I glanced at Jared, as if checking to see whether our words had woken him. "I think well. I think I might have tallen asleep. I didn't realize I was so tired."

I tried to smile remorsefully. I could rell I sounded stiff, like the top-careful actors on the television

The Seeker's eyes traced their route again, this time lingering on Jared. My heart imped painfully against the inside of my ribs. I proched the pill tighter

"It was irresponsible for me to drive for solong without sicep." I said quickly trying again to smile a little. I though we could make it to Phoenix befure I would need test. I'm very sorry."

"What's your name, miss?"

His voice was not harsh, but neither was it warm. He kept it low though, following my due.

"Leaves Above " I said using the name from the last hote. Would he want to check my story? I migh need someplace to refer him to

"Upsace-down Flower?" he guessed. His eyes thekered around their course.

"Yes. I was."

"My partner, too Were you on the island?"

"No." I said ou akly "The main and Berween the great rivers." He nodded pethaps a little disappointed. "Should I go back to Turson?" I asked. "I think I'm quite aware now Or maybe I should take a nap right here hast..."

"No " he interrupted me in a louder voice

I jumped startied, and the little pill supped from my tingers, it dropped to the metal floor with a taintry audible clink. I felt the blood drain from my face as though a plug had been pulled.

"Dian't mean to startle you." he appropried quality his eyes repeating their restless circle. "But you shou dn't larger here."

"Why?" I managed to whisper. My fingers twitched anxious v at the empty air.

"There was a disappearance recently "

"I don't understand. A disappearance."

"It could have been an accident—but there might be..." He besitated unwilling to say the word. "Lumans may be in this area."

"Hamanse" I squeaked, too loud. He beard the fear in my voice and interpreted it the only way be could

"There's no proof of that, Leaves Above. No sightings or anything. Don't be anxious. But you should proceed on to Phoen x without unnecessary delay."

"Of course Or maybe Tucson? That would be closer"

"There's no langer You can continue with your plans"

"If you're sure, Seeker . . . "

"Im quite sure], stuoping wandering off into the desert. Flower" He sm. ed. The expression warmed his face making it kind Just I ke all the other souls I didealt with. He wasn't anxious about me, but for me. He wasn't listening for lies. And he probably wouldn't recognize them if he was. Just another soul.

"I wasn't planning on it." I smiled back at him. "I I be more careful. I know I couldn't fall asteep now." I glanced at the desert out far ed's window with a wary expression, so the Seeket would think that fear was making me aiert. My express on tensed into a tast mask as I caught sight of a pair of lights reflected in the side mirror.

Jarea's spine stiffened at the same time, but he held his pose. It looked too tight

My eyes darred back to the Seeker's face

"I can help with that " he said, still smiling but looking down now as he tumbed to remove something from his pocket

He hadn't seen the change in my face. I tried to courto, the muscles in my cheeks, to make them relax, but I couldn't concentrate hard enough to make it happen.

In the rearview in rior, the head, ghts got closer

"You should not use this often" the Seeker went on, searching the other pocket now "L's not barmful, of course of the Healers wouldn't have us give a out. But if you use it frequently it will a teriyour sleep cycles. . . . Ah, here it is. Awake."

The lights slowed as they approached.

fast drive by, I begged in my head. Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop.

Let it be Kyle at the wheel, Melanie added, thinking the words like a prover.

Don't stop Just arme Don't stop Just drive

"Miss?"

I blanked, trying to focus "Um. Awakee"

"Just inhale this, Leaves Above"

He had a thin white serosol can in his hand. He sprayed a puff of misting the air in front of my face. I leaned forward obediently and took a shiff my eyes darting to the mirror at the same a mo

"It's grapetruit scented " the Seeker said. "Nice, don't you think?"

"Very nice" My orain was suddenly sharp, focused

The big moving truck slowed and then idled on the road behind us:

No. Mel and I shouted together. I searched the dark floor for one half second, hoping against hope that the little pill would be visible. I couldn't even make out my feet.

The Seeker glanced absenuy at the truck and then waved it forward.

Hooked back at the truck, roo, a lorded smile on my face. I couldn't see who was linving. My eyes reflected the headlights, shot out faint beams of their own.

The truck hesitated.

The Seeker waved again, more broadly this time "Go ahead" he muttered to himself

Drive! Drive! Drive!

Beside me, Jared's hand was clenched in a fist

Slowly the big truck shaddered into first gear and then incoed

forward through the space between the Seeker's vehicle and ours. The Seeker's spotlight outlined two silhouettes, two black profiles, both facing straight forward. The one in the driver's seat had a crocked nose.

Mel and I both exhaled in relief

"How do you feele"

"Alect," I told the Seeker

"It will wear off in about four hours"

"Thank you."

The Secker chuckied "Thank you Leaves Above When we saw you racing down the road, we thought we might have humans on our hands. I was sweating but not from the heat."

I shuddered

"Don't worry. You is be perfectly fine. If you dil ke, we can follow you to Phoenix."

"I'm just fine. You don't need to trouble yourself."

"It was nice to meet you. I'll be pleased when my shift is over so that I can go home and tell ny partner I met another green hist Flower She'll be so excited."

"Um the Brightest sun, longest day" for me." I said, giving him the Earthly translat on of the common greeting and farewell on the Flower Planet.

"Certainly. Have a pleasant journey."

"And you have a pleasant night."

He stepped back and the spotlight hat my eyes again. I bunked furnously

"Cut it. Hank." the Secker said shutting his eyes as he turned to wak toward the car. The night turned black again, and I forced another smile toward, he invisible Seeker named Hank.

I starred the engine with shaking hands

The Seekers were faster. The line black car with the incongruous light bar atop it puried to life. It executed a sharp better and then the tail lights were all I could see. They disappeared quickly into the night

a pulled back onto the road. My heart pumped the blood through my verns in hard little bursts. I could teel the fierce pulse throubing through to my fingertips.

"They re gone," I whispered through my suddenly chartering teeth.

I heard Jared swallow

"That was . . . close," he said.

"I thought Kyle was going to stop."

"Me, too,"

Neither of us could speak above a whisper

"The Seeker hought it" His teeth were st. clenched in anxiety "Yes."

"I wou do't have Your acting basn't improved much "

I shrugged My body was so rigid, it all moved together "They can't not be leve me. What I am well it's something impossible."

"Something unbelievable," he agreed: "Something wonderful"

His praise thawed some of the ice in my stomach, in my veins,

"Seekers aren't al. that different from the rest of them." I mur mured to myself. "Northing to be especially atraid of."

He shook his head back and forth slowly. "There really isn't anything you can't do, is there?"

I wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"Having you with us is going to change everything." he continued under his breath, talking to himself now

I could fee how his words made Mclanic sad but she was not an gry this time. She was resigned

You can beip them You can project them better than I could She sighed.

The slow moving taillights did not trighten the when they appeared on the road ahead. They were familiar a relief. I sped up — just a "title still a few miles below the limit— to pass them.

lared pulled a flashlight out of the glove compartment. I under stood what he was doing reassurance.

He held the lie, it to his own eyes as we passed the cab of the truck. I looked past him, through the other window. Ky e noduce once at Jared and took a deep breath, lan was teaning anxiously around him his eyes focused on me. I waved once, and he grimated.

We were gotting close to our hidden exit

"Should I go at the way to Phoenix"

lared thought about it. "No. They might see us on the way back

and stop us again. I don't trank they reatchewing. They reafocused on the road."

"No, they won't follow " I was sure of this.

"Let's go home, then."

"Home," I agreed wholcheartedly.

We killed the lights, and so did Kyle behind us.

We would take both vehicles right to the caves and unload quickly so they could be hidden before morning. The little overhang by the entrance would not hide them from view

I rolled my eyes as I thought of the way into and out of the caves. The big mystery I hadn, been able to solve for myself. Jeb was so tricky.

Tracky—just like the directions held given Mei, the lines held carved onto the back of her photo album. They didn't lead to his cave hideout at all. No, instead they made the person following them parade back and forth in front of his secret place, giving him ample opportunity to decide whether or not to extend an invitation inside.

"What do you think happened?" Jared asked interrupting my thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

"The recent disappearance the Seeker mentioned."

I stared ahead brankly "Wouldn't that so me?"

"I don't think you would coun as recent, Wanda, Besides, they weren't watching the treeway before we left. That's new. They re looking for us. Here."

His eyes narrowed, while mine widened.

"What have they been doing?" Jared suddenly exploded slapping his hand loudly against the dashboard 1 amped

"You think Jeb and the others did some bing?"

He didnic answer me, he just stared out across the star-bright desett with furious eves

I didn't understand. Why would the Seckers be looking for humans just because someone had disappeared in the deserte Accidents did happen. Why would they jump to that particular conclusions.

And why was fared angry? Our family in the caves wouldn't do anything to draw attention to themselves. They knew better than their

They wouldn't go outside unless there was an emergency of some kind

Or something they feit was urgent. Necessary

Had Doc and Jeb been taking advantage of my absence?

Jeb had only agreed to stop slaughtering people and soms while I was under the same roof. Was this their compromise?

"You okay?" Jared asked.

My throat was too thick to answer I shook my head. Tears streamed down my cheeks and fell from my chin to my lap.

"Maybe Td better drive"

I shook my head again. I could see well enough

He didn't argue with me.

I was stul crying a entry when we got to the utile mountain that bid our vast cave system. It was actually just a hill—an insignificant outcropping of volcanic rock, like so many others, sparsely decorated with spindly creosote and flat bladed prickly pears. The thousands of tiny vents were invisible, jost in the jumble of loose purple rocks. Somewhere, smoke would be rising black on black.

I got our of the van and leaned against the door wiping my eves. Jareu carre to stand beside me. He hesitated, then put a hand on my shoulder.

"Sorry I didn't know they were planning this. I had no idea. They shouldn't have..."

But he only thought that because they disomehow gotten cought. The moving truck rumbled to a slop behind us. Two doors slammed shut, and then feet were running toward us.

"What happened?" Kyle demanded, there first

Ian was right behind him. He took one look at my expression, at the tears still running down my cheeks, at Jarca's hand on my shoulder, and then rushed forward and threw his arms around me. He pulled me into his cliest. I didn't know why this made me cry harder. I doing to him while my tears leaked onto his shirt.

"It's okay. You d.d great, It's over."

"Seekers not the problem lant" Jared said, voice strained his hand still touching me though he had to lean forward to preserve that point of contact.

"Huh?"

"They were watching the road for a reason Sounds like Doc's been , working in our absence,"

I shouldered, and for a moment is seemed like I could taste silver broad in the back of my throat

"Why those — " Tan's tury relobed him of speech. He couldn't finish his sentence

"Nice" Kyle said in a disgusted tone. "Id ots. We're gone for a few weeks, and they we got the Seekers on patrol. They could have just asked as to —"

"Shut up, Kyle" Jared said barshly "That's neither here nor there at the momen. We've got to get this all unloaded fast. Who knows how many are watching for us? Let's grab a load and then get some more hands,"

I shook lan off so that I could help. The tears did not stop running. Ian stayed close to my side taking the heavy flat of canned soup. I picked up and replacing it with a big but light box of pasta.

We started down the steep pathway in, Jared leading. The utter blackness did not bother me il still didn't know this path we., but it wasn't difficult. Straight down then straight up

We were balfway there when a familiar voice called out from a distance. It echoed down the tunnel tractuning.

"I'hev re oack - ack - back!" Jamie was shouting

I tried to dry my tears on my shoulder, but I couldn't get them a...

A blue got approached bouncing as the carrier ran. Then Jam e bounded into view

His face threw me

I was trying to compose myself to greet him assuming he would be joyful and not wanting to apset him. But Jamie was a ready upset JJIs face was while and tense his eyes rimmed in rea. His dirity cheeks had rivulets through the dust there itracks made by tears.

"Jamies" lared and I said together dropping our boxes to the floor

lamer an straight for me and threw his arms around my waist

"On Wanda Oh Jared!" he subbed "Wes is dead. He's Jead. The Seeker killed him!"

Interrogated

killed Wes

My hands, scratched and bruised and painted with purple dost in the course of the traphic unloading, might as well have been painted red with his blood.

Wes was dead and it was as much my fault as if I dipulled the trigger myself.

All of us bin five were gathered in the kitchen new that the track was unloaded leating some of the perishables we'd picked up on the final shapping trip—cheese and tresh bread with milk—and listening to Job and Doc as they explained everything to Jared. Jan. and Kyle

I sat a little space away from the others, my head in my hands, too numb with grief and gui tito ask questions the way they did. Jamie sat with me. He patted my back now and then

Wes was already buries in the cark grotto beside Walter. He had died four days ago, the night that lared and I an and I had sat watching the tam. I in the park. I would never see my friend again, never hear his voice.

Tears splashed on the stone beneath mell and Jamie's pats increased in tempo

Andy and Parge were not bere.

They didriven the truck and the van back to the rikeling places. They would take the jeep from there to its usual rough garage, and then they dihave to walk the rest of the way home. They would be back before sunrise.

Lily was not here

"She's not doing so well," lamic had mi impred when he'd caught me scanning the room for her. I'd do't want to know any more I could imagine well enough.

Aaron and Brandt were not here.

Brandt now bore a smooth pank, circular scar in the hollow space beneath his left collarbone. The bullet had missed his heart and lungs by a boil and then burrowed ha fway through his shoulder blade trying to escape. Doe had used most of the Heal getting it out of him Brandt was fine now.

Wess build, had been better aimed. It had pierced his high olive skinned forehead and blown out the back of his head. There was nothing Doc could have done leven if he'd been right there with them a gallon of Heal at his disposal.

Branch who now carried in a holster of his hip a boxy heavy troply from the encounter was with Agron. They were in the tunne where we would have stored but spoils if it had not been occupied. It it was not being used as a prison again.

As if losing Wes was not enough,

It seemed hideously wrong to me that the numbers remailled he same. In my five living bodies, just like before I'd come to the caves. Wes and Walter were gone, but I was here.

And now so was the Seeker

My Seeker.

If I'd us, gone straight to Fucson If I had ust stayou in San Diego. If I had just skepped this planet and guite somewhere entirely different. If I'l given myself as a Mother like anyone ease would have after five or six planets. It, if if I'l had not come here if I had not given the Seeker the clues she needed to follow then Wes would be alive. It had taken her longer than me to figure them out in the when she did.

she dian't have to pursue them with caution. She diparreted through the desert in an all terrain SUV leaving bright new scars across the fragile desert landscape, each pass getting closer

They had to do something. They had to stop her

I had killed Wes.

They stul would have caught me in the first place. Wanda. I lea them here, not you.

I was too miserable to answer her

Besides if we baant come here James would be dead. And maybe Jared too. He would have died tonight without you

Death on every side. Death everywhere I looked

Why did she have to toltone mer I mounted to myself. I m not harting the other souls here not ready. I m even storing some of their lives by hering here, by keeping Doc from his doomed efforts. Why did she have to follow?

Why did they keep her? Me. snaded. Why didn, they kin her right away. Or kill her such. I don't care how? Why is she still awe?

Fear flattered in my stomach. The Seeker was alive, the Seeker was here

I shouldn't have been afraid of her.

Of course, it made sense to be alraid that her disappearance would bring the other Seckers down on us. Everyone was atraid of that Spying on the search for my body, the humans had seen how vocal she was about her convictions. She dideen trying to convince the other Seckers that there were humans hading in this desert wasteland. None seemed to take her serious y. They had gone home, she was the only one who kept tooking.

But now she a vanished in the middle of her search. That changed

everything.

Her vehicle had been moved far away left in the Lesert on the other is de of Tueson. It looked as thought she didisappeared in the same way it was believed I had pieces of her bag left torn nearby the snacks she disappeared with her chewed open and scattered. Would the other souls accept such a coincidence?

We already knew they would not. Not entirely. They were looking

Would the search become more intense-

But to be atra d of the Seeker herse t That undn't make much

sense She was physically insignificant probably smaller than Jamie. I was stronger and taster than she was. I was surrounded by friends and all earlies and she inside these caves at least, was all alone. Iwo guns, the rifle and her own Glock—the very gun Ian had once envied the gun that had killed my friend. Wes—were trained on her at every moment. Only one thing had kept her alive until now, and it couldn't save her for long.

Jeb had thought I might want to talk to her. That was an

Now that I was back, she was condemned to the within hours whether I spoke to her or not.

So why did I feel as though I was at the disadvantage? Why this strange premonition that she would be the one to walk away from our confrontation?

I hadn't decided if I wanted to a k to her. At least, that was what I'd told Jeb.

Without a doubt. I did *not* want to talk to her a was remitted to ever see her face again—a face that, no matter how I tried I could not imagine looking frightened.

But if I to d them I had no desire for conversation. Aaron would shoot her. It would be ake I'd given him the order to fire. Like I'd pulled the trigger.

Or worse. Due would try to cut her out of the human body 1 flinched away from the memory of the stiver blood smeared all over the hands of my friend.

Melanie twisted uncasily, trying to escape the torment in my head.

Wandar Theore just going to shoot her Don't panie

Should this comfort med I couldn't avoid the imagined tableau. Aaron, the Seeker's gen in his hand, the Seeker's body's awiy crumbling to the stone floor, the rea blood pooling around her

You don't have to watch

That wouldn't stop it from happening

Metanie's thoughts became a halle france. But we want her to die Right. She halled Wes. Best les, she can't stay active. No matter what

She was right about everything, of course. It was true that there was no way the Seeker could stay at vel Imprisoned, she would work dog godly to escape. Freed, she would quickly be the death of at my fam by It was true she had killed Wes. He was so young and so loved. His death left a ourning agony in its wake. I understood the cia m of human justice that demanded her life in return.

It was also true that I wanted her to die

"Wanda? Wanda?"

Jamie shook my arm. It took me a moment to realize that someone bad called my name. Perhaps many times already.

"Wanda?" Jeb's votce asked again

I looked up He was standing over me. His face was expressionless, the blank facaue that meant he was in the grip of some strong emonon. His poker face.

"The boys want to know if you have any questions for the

Seeker"

I put one hand to my torchead, trying to block the images there. "If I don't?"

"They re ready to be done with guard Juty. It is a hard time. They direther be with their friends right now."

I needed "Ckay I guess I d better go and see her at once, then" I shoved myself away from the wall and to my teet. My hands were shaking so I cienched them into fists.

You don't have any questions.

I'll think of some

Why prolong the mentable?

I have no idea

You're trying to save her. Me ame accused, full of outrage

There's no way to do that

No There isn't Ame you want her dead anyway So et them shoot ber

I cringed.

"You okay?" Jamie asked

I needed not trusting my voice enough to speak

"You cann't have to." Jeb told me, his eves sharp on my face

"It's okay," I whispered.

Jamie's hand wrapped around mine, but I shook it off. "Stay here, Jamie."

"I'll come with you"

My voice was stronger now. "Oh no, you will not "

We stared at each other for a moment, and for once I won the argument. He stock his chin out stubborn vious slouched back against the wall

Ian, too, seemed inclined to follow me out of the kitchen, but I stopped him in his tracks with a single look. Jared watched me go with an unfathomable expression.

"She's a complainer." Jeb told me in a low voice as we walked back toward the hole. "Not quiet the you were. Always asking for more food water plows. She threatens a lot too. The Seekers will get you all." That kinds thing. It's been hard on Brandt especially. She's pushed his temper right to the edge."

I nodded. This did not surprise me one bit

"She hasn't tried to escape, though A lot of talk and no action. Once the guns come up, she backs right down."

I recoiled

"My guess is, she wants to live pretty dang bac," Jeb marmured to himself

"Are you sure this is the — safest place to keep her?" I asked as we started down the black, twisting tunnel

Jeb chuckeed. "You didn't find your way out." he reminded me "Sometimes the best hiding place is the one that's in plain sight."

Ms answer was flat "She's more motivated than I was "

"The boys re keepin a sharp eye on her. Nothin to worry about "

We were almost there. The tunnel turned back on itself in a sharp V

How many times had a rounded this corner my hand tracing along the inside of the pointed switchback. List like this? I dinever traced along the outside wail. It was uneven with jutting tooks that would leave bruises and cause me to trip. Staying on the inside was a shorter walk anyway.

When they differ showed me that the Viwas not a Vibut a Yill rivor branches forking off from another tunnel the tunnel. If diet pretty stupid Like Jeb said, hid ng thangs in plain sight was sometimes the dieverest route. The times I'd been desperate enough to even consider escaping the caves into mind had skipped right over this place in my speculations. This was the hole, the prison. In my head, it was the darkest deepest with in the caves. This was where they'd buried me

Even Mell sneakler than I was, had never dreamed that they did be J me eaptive just a few paces from the exit

It wasn't even the only exit. But the other was small and tight, a crawl space. I have t found that one because I'd walked into these caves standing upright. I hadn't been looking for that kind of tunnel. Besides, I'd never explored the edges of Doo's hospital. I'd avoided it from the beginning.

The voice familiar even though it seemed part of another life interrupted my thoughts.

"I wonder how you're still alive earing like this. Ugh!"

Something plastic clartered against the rocks.

I could see the blue tight as we rounded the last corner

"I didn't know humans had the patience to starve someone to death. That seems like too complex a plan for you shortsighted creatures to grasp."

Jebichackled "Crotta say I'm impressed with those boys. Surprised

they held up this long."

We turned into the intidead end tunnel. Brandt and Aaron, both sitting as far as possible from the end of the tunnel where the Seeker paced, both with gains in their hands, sighed with relief when they saw us approaching.

"Finally." Brandt mattered. His face was etched in hard lines of

grief.

The Seeker balted in her pacing

I was surprised to see the conditions she was kept in.

She was not stuffed into the any cramped hole, but comparatively free stomping to and tro across the short width of the tunne. On the floor against the flat end of the tunnel, were a mat and a pillow. A plastic ray was tilted at an angle against the wall at about the midpoint of the cave, a few acama roots lay scattered near it with a soup how. A little soup was splittered out from where that lay. This explained the clatter I a just heard—she'd thrown her food. It poked as though she'd eaten most of a first, though.

I stared at this relative v humane setup and to t an odd pain in my

stomach.

Who did we will. Metame it uttered sal only. This stung her, too.

"You want a in nute with here" Brandt asked me and the pain

stabled again. Had Brandt ever referred to me as ng a feminine pronoung I wasn, surprised that Jeb had done this for the Scener, but everyone elses.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Careful." Aaron cautioned: "She's an angry little thing."

I nodaed

The others stayed where they were I walked down the tunnel alone,

It was hard to lift my eyes, to meet the gaze that I could feel like cold fingers pressing against my face

The Secker was giaring at me, a harsh speer twisting her features. I'd never seen a sourcise that expression before

"We a heap there Mesanie" she mocked me "What look you so long to come visite"

I didn't answer. I walked toward her slowly trying hard to believe that the hate coursing through my hody really did not be ong to me

"Did your list a friends thank I would talk to your Spill all my secrets because you carry a gagged and lobotomized soul around in your head, reflecting through your eyes?" She laughed agrasively

I stopped two long strides away from her my body tensed to run. She made no aggress we move toward me, but I could not relax my mascles. This was not like meeting the Seeker on the highway — I don't have the usual sensation of safety that I felt around the gent e others of my kind. Again, the strange conviction that she would live long after I was gone swept through me.

Don't be redictions. Ask per your questions. Have you come up with any?

"So we at do you wanter Did you request permission to kill me personally. Me amine" the Seeker bissed.

"They call me Wanda here," I said.

She if nehed stightly when I opened my Lps to speak, as if expecting me to shout My low even voice seemed to apset her more than the scream she anticipated

I examined her falle while sheig ared at me with her builging eyes. It was dirty stained with purple dust and dried sweat. Other than that there wasn't a mark on it. Again, this gave me an odd uche

"Wanda," she repeated in a flat voice. "Well, what are you wanting tor? Didn't they give you the okay? Were you planning to use your bare hands or my gun?"

"I'm not here to kill you."

She stituted sourty. "To interrogate me, then? Where are your instruments of torture, human?"

I cringed. "I won't hurt you."

Insecurity flickered across her face and then van shed be and her sneer "What are they keeping me for them? Do they think I can be tamed, like your pet soul?"

"No. They just — they didn't want to kill you until they had consulted me. In case I wanted to talk to you first."

Her lists owered narrowing her protracing eyes. "Do you have something to say?"

I swa lowed "I was wondering. "I only had the same question. I'd been unable to answer for myself. "Why? Why coulant you let me be dead. Like the rest of them? Why were you so determined to hunt me down? I'd don't want to hart anyone. I just wanted. It to go my own way."

She reaped a vonto her toes showing her face toward mine. Some one moved behind mer but I con idn't hear more than that — she was shouting in my face.

"Because I was rig t'" she shrieked. "More than right! Look at them a l' A vile nest of killers, tarking in wait! Just like I thought only so much worse! I know you were out here with them. One of them! I told them there was danger! I told them."

She stopped parting and took a step back from me sturing over my shoulder. I dain a look away to see what had made her retreat. It assumed to had something to do with what Jeb had last old me — once the gams come up she backs right down. I analyzed her expression for a moment as her heavy breathing slowed.

"But they undnot listen to you. So you came for us alone "

The Seeker didn't answer. She took another step back from medoubt twisting her expression. She looked oddly vulnerable for a second as if my words had stripped away the shield she diheen hiding behind. "They if now for you but in the end they never be leved you at all, and they?" I said, watching as each word was confirmed in her desperate eyes. It make me very sure. "So they won't take the search further than that When they don't find you their interest with fade. We'll be careful, as usual. They won't find us."

Now I could see true tear to her eves for the first time. The termble—to her—knowledge that I was right. And I felt hetter for my nest of humans, my little family. I was right. They would be safe. Yet incongruously, I didn't feet any better for myself.

I had no more questions for the Seeker. When I walked away she would die. Would they wait until I was far enough not to hear the shot? Was there apywhere in the caves that was far enough for that?

I stated at her angry, fearful tace, and I knew how deep v I hated her. How much I never wanted to see that tace again for the rest of my lives.

The hate that made it imposs bee for me to a low her to die

"I don't know how to save you." I whispered, too low for the his mans to hear. Why did that sound like a Le in my ears? "I can't think of a way."

"Why would you want to? Yourcone of them." But a spasm of hope sparked in her eyes. Jeb was right A., the higster, als the threats. She wanted very much to stay a ive

I noduced at her accusation a little absently because I was thinking hard and fast "But still me," I mormured "I don't want I don't want..."

How to transb that sentences I didn't want — the Seeker to user. No. That wasn't true

I stidn't want — to hate the Secker? To hate her so much that I wanted her to die. To have her die while I hated her. Almost as if she died because of my hate.

If I truly did not want her death, would I be able to think of a way to save her? Was it my hate that was blocking an answer? Would I be responsible if she died?

Are you insome. Melanic profested

She'd killed my triend, shot him dead in the desert, broken L Iv's heart. She'd put my tamily in dailger. As long as she lived, she was a

danger to them. To Ian, to James to Jared. She would do everything in her power to see them all dead.

That's more tike at. Melanie approved of this train of thought

But if she ares, and I could have saved her if I diwanted to — who am I then?

You have to be practical. Wands This is a war Whose side are you on?

You know the answer to that

I do. And that s who you are, Wanda

But had what if I could an both? What if I come save her aft and keep everyone here safe at the same time?

A heavy wave of nausea collection my stomach as I saw the enswer I dibeen trying to believe didn't exist

The only wan I diever built between Melante and me crumbled to dust

No! Mei gasped. And then screamed. NO!

The answer I must have known I would find. The answer that explained my strange premonition.

Because I could save the Seeker Of course I could But it would cost me. A trade. What had Kyle said? A life for a life.

The Secker stared at mc, her dark eyes full of venom

Sacrificed

to he Seeker scrutimized my face walk Me, and I tought

1 No, Wanda, no!

Don't be stupid. Mer. You of an people should see, he potential of this choice. Isn't this what you want?

But even as I tried to look at the happy ending. I couldn't escape the horror of this choice. This was the secret I should the to protect. The information I dibeen, lesperate to keep safe no matter what hid coustorture I was put through.

It is was not the kind of torture I diexpected a personal crisis of conscience confused and complicated by love for my hum to family Very painful, nevertheless:

I could not claim to be an expatriate of I did this. No. I would be purely a traitor

Not for her Wanda No. for her' Mel howied

Shown I want? Want until they catch another soul? An innocent some whom I have no reason to hate? I'll have to make the decision sometime.

Not you! Wait! Think about this!

My stomach rough again, and I had to hunch my body forward and take a deep breath. I just managed not to gag.

"Wanda?" Jeb ca..ed in concern

t coma no it. Mer. I rould nistify leiting her me if she was one of those innocent sones. I coma et them ke her then I could crust myself to make an objective decision.

But she's harmble Wanda' We nate ber!

Exactly And teams trust myself Look as you I amost admit see the answer

"Wanda, you am right?"

The Seeker glared past melltoward Job's voice.

"Fine Jeb." I gasped My voice was breathy, strained I was surprised at how bad it sounded.

The Seeker's dark eyes flickered between us, unsure. Then she recorded from me cringing into the wall I recognized the pose remembered exactly how it feit to hold it.

A gentie hand came down on my shoulder and spun me around

"What's going on with you, hone" Jeb asked

"I need a minute," I told him breathless.v. I looked straight into his faded domin eyes and told him something that was most definitely not alice. "I have one more question. But I reasy need a minute to myse for you. "I wait for me?"

"Sure, we can wait a little while more. Take a breather."

I needed and walked as quickly as I could from the prison. My legs were stiff with terror at first, but I found my stride as I moved. By the lime I passed Agron and Brandt, I was almost running

"What happened?" I heard Aaron whisper to Brandt, his voice

bewildered.

I wasn't sure where to hide while I thought. My feet, like a shuftle on automatic pitot took me through the corndors toward my sleeping room. I could any hope that it would be empty

It was dark parely any light from the stars tricking down through the cracked realing. I didn't see Ldy to I tripped over her in the darkness.

I almost didn't recognize her tear swohen face. She was curiou into

a tight, thry ball on the floor in the in ddle of the passageway. Her eyes were wide, not quite comprehending who I was

"Why?" she asked me

I stared at her wordlessly

"I said that life and love go on But why do they? They shou do t Not anymore. What's the point?"

"I don't know L. v. I m not sure what the point is "

"Why?" she asked aga n, not speaking to me anymore. Her glassy eyes looked right through me.

I stepped carefully past her and harried to my room. I had my own question that had to be answered.

To my great relief, the toom was empty. I threw myself facedown on the mattress where Jamie and I slept.

When I'd told leb I had one more question, that was the truth. But the question was not for the Seeker. The question was for me

The question was would I — not could I — no a?

I could save the Seeker's life I know how It would not endanger any of the lives here. Except my own I would have to trade that

No. Melante tried to be firm through her panie.

Pleasé let me think

No

This is the thing. Mer It's metotable anyway I can see that now I should have seen it long ago. It's so obvious.

No, it isn't

I remembered our conversation when Jamie was ill. When we were making up. I'd told her that I wouldn't crase her and that I was sorry that I couldn't give her more than that

It wasn't so much a de as it was an unfinished sentence. I couldn't give her more than that — and stay adve myself

The actual he had been given to Jared. I ditted him, just seconds later that I didn't know how to make myself not exist. In the context of our discussion, it was true. I didn't know how to tade away, here inside Melanie. But I was surprised I hadn't heard the obvious he right then, hadn't seen in that moment what I was seeing now. Of course I know how to make myself not exist.

It was just that I had never considered that opt on viable, ult mate betraval that it was to every soul on this planet

Once the humans knew that I had this answer the one they had murdered for over and over again, it would cost me

No, Wanda!

Don't you want to be free?

A long pause

I wouldn't ask you for this she find ly said. And I wouldn't do it for you. And I sure as hele wouldn't do it for the Seeker.

You don't have to ask I think I might have volunteered eventually.

Why do you think that? she demanded her tone close to a sob. It touched me. I expected her to be elated.

In part because of them force and fame I can give them the whole world, everything they want I can give them you. I probably would have realized but summary Who knows? Maybe forced would have asked You know I wouldn't have said no.

lan's right. You're too seef sucreficing. You don't have any timits. You need limits, Wanda!

Ah. Ian I mounted A new pain wisted through me surprisingly close to my heart.

You'll take the whom worth away from him. Everything he want-

It would never work with lan. Not in this body, even though be loves it. It doesn't love him.

Wanaa 1 Melanie struggled for words. Still the joy I expected from her d d not come. Again this touched toe. I don't trink I can et you do this You're more important than that In the bigger picture, you are of much more value to them than I am You can help them, you can save hem I can't do any of that You have to stay.

I can't see any other way. Mel I wonder how I dian't see it sooner it seems so completely obvious. Of course I have to go Of course I have to give you yourself back I already knew we sould were wrong to come here So I ann't have any choice note but to do the right thing, and eave You all surprises without me before, you ill do it again. You've rearried so much about the souls from me — you a help them. Can't you see? This is the happy ending. It's the way they all need the story to finish I can give them hope. I can give them.— not a future. Maybe not that But all much as I can. Everything I can.

No. Wanda, no.

She was crying becoming incoherent. Her sortow brought lears to my eyes. I dino idea that she cared so much for me. A most as much as I cared to their I hadn't realized that we loved each other.

Even it Jarea had never asked me for this leven it Jarea did not exist. Once this path had occurred to me. I would have had to proceed down it. I loved her that much

No wonder the success rale for resistant hosts was so low here on Earth. Once we learned to love our human host, what hope did we souls have? We could not exist at the expense of one we loved. Not a soul. A soul could not live that way.

I rolled myself over and in the starlight. I looked at my body

My hands were a rty and scrarched but under the surface but issues they were beautiful. The skin was a pre-ty-sun browned color even obtained in the pale light it was prerty. The half moons of white at the bases. I fluttered my hingers watching the most les pull the bones in graceful patterns. I let them dance above me, where they became black fluid shapes against the stars.

I ran them through my hair. I was a most to my shoulders new Me would like that. After a rew weeks of shampoo in hote, showers and Health's tain its, it was glossy and soft again.

I stretched my atms out as far as they would go tagging agains the tendons until some of my joints cracked. My arms left strong. They could put me up a mountainside they could carry a heavy load they could plow a field. But hey were also soft. They could hold a third ey could comfort a friend they could love. Furthat was not for the

I more a deep breath, and lears well ed out of the corners of my eyes and maked down my temptes into my hair.

I consect the muscles in my legs left their ready strength and speed. I wanted to run to have an open held that I could race across list to see how fast I could go I wanted to do this barefoot so I could feel the earth benealh my feet. I wanted to feel the wind fly through my hair I wanted it to run so that I could smell it in the air as I ran

My feet flexed and pointed slowly to the thy bin of my breathing. In and cut I rex and point It telt bice.

I traced my face with my hingertips. They were warm on my skin skin that was smooth and pretty. I was glad I was giving Mc and her face back the way it had been I closed my eyes and stroked my eyelids.

Id yed in so many hodies but never one Hoved a keith is Never one that I craved in this way. Of course this would be the one I dhave

to give up.

The rony made me is ghound I concentrated on the fee of the air that popped in but, bubbles from my chest and up through my throat Laughter was like a fresh breeze. It cleaned its way through the body making everything feel good. Did other species have such a simple healer? I couldn't remember one.

I touched my lips and remembered how it tell to kiss Jared and how it tell to kiss Ian. Not everyone got to kiss so many other beautiful bodies. I dihad more than some leven in this sport lime.

It was just so short. Maybe a year now, I wasn't completely si re. I ist one quick revolution of a base green planet around an inexcept one, ve. ow star. The shortest life of any I diever lived.

The shortest, the most important, the most hearthreaking of a ves. The are that would torover define me. The lite that had finally the me to one star to one pranct, to one small family of strangers.

A little more time would that be so wrong?

No. Mel whispered fast ake a lit le more timi

Y in never know how much time out I have I whispered back

But I die. I knew exactly how much tone I had I couldn't take any more time. My time was up.

I was going anyway. I had it do the right thing he my rise seat with what time I had left.

With a sigh that seemed to come all the way from the soles of proteet and the pulms of my hands. I git up

Auton and Brandt wouldn't want forever. And now I had a few more questions that I necuculanswered. This time the questions were for Doc.

The caves were tall of sad cast down eves. It was easy enough is supunobtrusively past, hem all No one cared what I was come takht now except maybe Job Brandt, and Auron and hey weren't here

I didn't have an open, ramy be di but at least I had the long south tunne. It was too dark to run flat out the way I wanted, but I kept up a steady log. It felt good as my must es warmed.

I expected I would find Doc already there but I d wait if I had to. He would be alone. Poor Doc that was usually the case now.

Doe had been sleeping alone to his hospital since the right we'd saved familes life. Sharon had taken her things from their room and moved them to her mother's, and Doe wou do't sleep in the empty room.

Such a great hatted. Sharon would rather kill her own happiness, and Doc's, too, than torgive him for heaping me heal Jamie.

Sharon and Maggie were barely a presence in the caves anymore. They looked past everyone now, the way they used to look past only me. I wondered it that would change when I was gone, or if they were both so rigid in their grudge that it would be too late for them to change.

What an extraordinar is stupid way to waste time

For the first time ever, the south tunnel feet short. Before I thought I digone halfway. I could see Doc's light glowing dumb from the rough arch ahead. He was home.

I slowed myself to a walk before I interrupted him. I didn't want to seare him, to make him think there was an emergency

He was strong startled when I appeared, a tile breathless to the stone doorway.

He tumped up from behind his desk. The book he was reading fell out of his hands.

"Wanda? Is something wrong?"

"No, Doc," I reassured h.m. "Everything's fine"

"Does someone need me?"

"Just me." I gave him a weak smile

He walked around his desk to meet me his eyes wide with eithos tty. He paused half a step away and raised one eyebrow

His long face was gentle, the opposite of alarming. It was hard to remember how he dilocked like a monster to me before

"You are a man of your word," I began

He nodded and opened his mouth to speak but I held one hand up.

"No one will ever test that more than I will test it now." I warned him.

He waited, eyes confused and wary.

I took a deep breath, telt it expand my langs

"I know now to do what you've been ending so many lives to discover I know how to take the souls from you't bod es without harm to either Of course I know that We at have to, in case of an emergency I even performed the emergency procedure once, when I was a Bear."

I stared at him waiting for his response. It took him a long moment and his eyes grew wilder every second.

"Why are you to ling me this?" he finally gasped

"Because I — I am going to give you the knowledge you need." I held up my hand again. "But only if you will give me what I want in return. I'm warning you right now it won't be any easier for you to give me what I wan, han it will be for me to give you what you want.

His face was hercer than I diever seen it "Name your erms"

"You can't kill them—the souls you remove. You must give moved word—vour promise, your each your you—that you will give them sate conduct on to another life. This means some canger, you will have to have cryotanks, and you will have to get those souls onto shi tiles off planet. You have to send them to another world to ave. But they won't be able to hurt you. By the time they reach their next planet, your grandch, dren with be dead."

Wo. I my conditions in tigate my guilt in this? Only if Doc could be trusted.

He was thinking very hard as I explained. I watched his face to see what he would make of my demand. He didn't look angry, but his eyes were still wild.

"You don't wan us to ke, the Secker?" he guesses.

I didn't answer his question because he wouldn't inderstand the answer, I did want them to kill her. That was the whole problem. In stead, I explained further.

"She is be the first the test I want to make sure will le I'm still here that you're going to follow through I will do the separation my self. When she is safe I it teach you how it's done."

"On whe?"

"Kidnapped souls. The same as before. I can't guarantee you that

the burnan in inds will a line back. I don't know if the erased can return. We'll see with the Seeker."

Doc bi need processing something "What do you mean while you are still here? Are you leaving?"

I stared at h m, was $m_{\rm e}$ for the realization to h t. He stared back uncomprehending

"Don't you realize what I'm giving your" I whispered

Finally con prebension stammed home in his express on

I spoke quick y before he could "There's something a se I might no ask you for Doc I don't want to I take the shapped off to an other planet. This is my planet at truly is. And yet there's really no place for me here. So I know the tight offend some of the others. Don't tell them if you think they won't allow at Lie if you have to But I dike to be like ed by Walt and Wes it anyou up har for mer I won't take up much space." I smiled weakly again.

No Melanic was howing No. no. no no

"No. Wanda" Duc objected, too, with a shocked expression.

"Pie ise Doc", whispered wine ng against the protest in my head which was getting louder. "I don't think Wes or Walt will mind."

"This more what I means I can the you Wanda I gho I miso sick of death so sick of killing my Internal." Does you exaught in a son

I put my hand on his rhin arm inabhed a "People die here It hap pens." Kyle had said something to that effect. Fill my that I should quote kyle of all people twice in one night.

"What about fared and famile." Doc asker in a chicked voice

"They a have Me and They a be fine."

"Ian?"

Through my teeth "Better oil without me."

Doc shook his head wijing at his eyes. "I need to think about this Wanda."

We do it have long. They went was to ever before they kill the Seeker?

"I don't mean about that part. I agree to these terms. But I don't think I can still you."

It's a for none. Doe You have to decide right now. And "I realized I had one more demand. "And you can titell anyone else about the ast part of our agreement. No me. Those are my terms, take them.

THE HOST 5/5

or leave them. Do you want to know how to remove a sout from a buman body?"

Doc shook his head again. "Let me think "

"You already know the answer Doc This is what you've been searching for."

He last kept shaking his head slow v back and forth.

I tgnored that symbol of denial because we both knew his choice was made.

Prepared

found Jared and famile in our room, waiting for me worry on both their faces. Jared must have talked to Jeb.

"Are you an right?" Jared asked me while Jamie ,umped up and threw his arms around my waist.

I wasn't sure how to answer his question. I didn't know the answer "Jared. I need your help."

Jared was on his teet as soon as I was done speaking. Jamie leaned back to look a my face. I didn't meet Jamie's gaze. I wasn't sure how much I could bear right now.

"What do you need me to do?" Jared asked.

"I'm making a raid. I could use some — extra muscle."

"What are we after?" He was intense already shifting into his mission mode

"I L explain on the way. We don't have a loc of time."

"Can I come?" Jamie said

"No!" Jared and I said together

Jamie frowned and let me go sinking down onto the mattress and

crossing his legs. He put his face in his hands and sulked. I couldn't look directly at him before I calcked out of the room. I was already yearning to sit beside him, to hold him tight and forget this whole mess.

Jared ollowed as I retraced my path through the south tunnel "Why this way?" he asked.

"I " He would know if I tried to be or evade "I don't want to run into anyone Jeb Aaron, or Brandt particularly"

"Why?"

"I don't want to have to explain myself to them. Not yet "

He was quiet, trying to make sense of my answer

I changed the subject "Do you know where Lily is? I don't think she should be alone. She seems . "

"Ian's with ber"

"That's good. He's the kindest "

Ian would help Lily he was exactly what she needed now. Who would help Ian when the I shook my head, shaking the though, away

"What are we in such a hurry to get?" Jared asked me I took a deep preach before I answered him "Cryotanks"

The south tunnel was black. I could not see his face. His footsteps did not falter beside me, and he didn't say anything for several minutes. When he spoke again, I could hear that he was focusing on the raid — single-minded, setting aside whatever carrosity he felt and after the mission was planned to his satisfaction.

"Where do we get them?"

"Empty cryotanks are stored outside Healing facilities until they te needed. With more souls coming in than leaving, there will be a surplus. No one will guard them, no one will notice if some go missing."

"Are you sure? Where did you get his information?"

"I saw them in the cage piles and piles of them. Even the little factor we went to in Tocson had a small store of them, crated outside the delivery bay."

"If they were crated then how can you be sure

"Haven't you noticed our fondness for labels-"

"I'm not doubting you." he said "I just want to make stire that you've thought this through."

I heard the couble meaning in his words.

"I have."

"Let's get it done, then."

Doc was already gone—already with Job, as we hadn't passed him on the way. He must have left right behind me. I won fered how his news was being taken. I hoped they weren't stupid anough to discuss it in front of the Seeker. Would she shreather, aman host sibrain if she guessed what I was doing? Would she assume I diturned traitor entitely? That I would give the humans what they needed with no restrictions?

Washit that what I was about to Jo. though? When I was gone, would Doc bother to keep his word?

Yes, he woma try I believed that I had to believe that But he coulant do it alone. And who would help him?

We scrambled up the tight black vent that opened onto the southern face of the rocky bill about halfway up the low peak. The eastern edge of the horizon was curning gray with last a bint of pink blecking into the line between sky and rock.

My eves were locked on my leet as I climbed down. It was neces sary there was no path, and the loose make made for treacherous tooting. But even if the way had been paved and smooth. I doubted I would have been able to I fit my eves. My shoulders, too, seemed trapped in a slump.

trager. Not a misht, not a wanderer. Just a traitor. I was putting my gentle bro hers, and sisters, lives into the angry and mot vated hands of my adopted human family.

My humans had every right to hare the souls. This was a war, and I was giving them a weapon. A way to kill with impunity

I considered this as we can through the Jesert in the growing light of dawn in can because with the Seckers looking we shouldn't be out in the daylight.

hocusing on this and enviewing my choice not as a sacrifice but rather as arming the humans in exchange for the heeker's life — I knew that it was wrong. And if I was trying to save only the between this would be the moment when a would change my mind and turn around the wasn't worth selling out the others. Even she would agree with that

Or would she? I soudenly wondered. The Seeker didn't seem to be as what was the word fared had used? Altrustic As altrustic as the rest of s. Maybe she would count her own life dearer than the lives of many.

But it was too late to change my mind. I'd already thought fat beyoud just saving the Seeker. For one thing, this would happen again. The humans would keeping souls they came across on ess I gave them another option. More than that, I was going to save Meianic, and that was worth the sacrifice. I was going to save Jared and Jamie, too. Might as well save the repugnant Seeker while I was acid.

The souts were wrong to be here. My humans, teserved their world. I could not give it back to them, but I could give them this. If only I could be sure that they would not be crue!

I would jost have to trust Doc, and hope

And maybe wring the promise from a few more of my friends it st in case.

I wondered how many human lives I would save. How many souls lives I *might* save. The only one I couldn't save now was myself.

I signed heavily. Even over the sound of our exerted breathing, lared heard that In my peripheral vision. I saw his face turn, felt his eves boring into me, but I d J not look over to meet his gaze. I stared at the ground.

We got to the teep's biding place before the simbad climbed over the eastern peaks though the sky was a ready light blue. We ducked into the shallow cave list as the first rays painted the descrit sand gold.

lated grabbed two bott es of water out of the backseat tossed one to me, and then lounged against the wall. He gulped down half a bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before he spoke.

"I could tell you were in a harry to get out of there but we need to wait annu dark if you're planning a smash and grab."

I swallowed my mouthful of water "That's fine I'm's re they ll wait for as now."

His eyes searched my face.

"I saw your Seeker" he to dime waithing my reactain. "She's energetic."

I nodded: "And vocal."

He smiled and relied his eyes. "She doesn't seem to enjoy the accommodations we provided."

My gaze dropped to the flaor "Could be worse" I mambled. The strangely realcus burt I dibeen feeling leaked, amounted into my voice.

"That's true " he agreed, his voice subdued

"Why are they so kind to her?" I whispered "She killed Wes."

"Well, that's your fault."

I stated up at him surprised to see the slight curve of his mouth he was teasing me

"Mine?"

His small smale wavered. "They didn't want to fee, ake monsters. Not again. They re-try, gitto make up for before only a little too late—and with the wrong soul I didn't realize that would—burt your feelings. I would have thought you d like it better that way."

"I do." I d.dn't want them to hart anyone "It's always better to be kind. I ust: "I took a acrep breath. "I'm glad I know why."

Their kindess was for me, not for her. My shoulders felt lighter

"It's not a good feeling—knowing that you profoundly deserve the fit e of *moniter*. It's better to be kind than to feelightly." He smiled again and then yawned. That made me yawn

"Long night." he commented. "And we've got another one coming. We should sleep."

I was glad for his suggestion. I knew he had many questions about exact viwhat this raid meant. I also knew he would have already put several things together. And I didn't want to discuss any of it.

I stretched out on the smooth patch of sand beside the jeep. To my shock, Jared came to be beside me right beside me. He carled around the curve of my back.

"Here" he said and he reached around to so de his fingers under my face. He pulsed my head up from the ground and then moved his arm under it, making a pillow for me. He set his other arm drape over my waist.

It took a few seconds before I was able to respond "Thanks."

He yawned. I telt his breath warm the back of my neck. "Get some rest, Wanda."

Holding me in what could only be considered an embrace. Jured to I asleep quickly as he had always been able to do. I tried to relax with his arm warm around me, but it took a long time.

This embrace made me wonder how much he had a ready guessed.

My weary that ghrs tanged and twisted lared was right in had been a very long night. Though not had long enough. The rest of my days and nights were going to fly by as if they were only min ites.

The next thing I knew Jared was shaking me awake. The light in the little covern was dim and orangey. Sunset

Tared pulsed me to my feet and handed me a hiker's meal bar — this was the kind of rations they kept with the jeep. We are and drank the rest of our water in silence, lared's face was serious and focused.

"Still in a hurry?" he asked as we climbed into the jeep.

No. I wanted the rime to stretch out forever

"Yes." What was the point in putting it off? The Seeker and her body would die if we waited too long, and I would still have to make the same choice.

"We'll his Phoenix, then I 's logical that they wouldn't notice this kind of raid. It doesn't make sense for humans to take your cold storage tanks. What possible use could we have for them?"

The question didn't sound at all metorical and I could fee, him looking at me again. But I stated ahead at the rocks and said nothing.

It had been dark for a while by the time we traded velocies and got to the freeway Jared wared a few careful minutes with the inconspicious secan's lights off. I counted ten cars passing by. Then there was a long carkness between the headlights, and Jared put econto the road.

The trip to Phoen v was very short though Jared kept the speed serupulously below the limit. Time was speeding up, as if the Earth were spinning faster.

We settled into the steady moving traffic flowing with a along the highway that circled the flat, sprawling city I saw the hospital from the road. We followed another car up the exit ramp, moving evenly without hurry.

Jared turned into the main parking lot.

"Where now?" he asked, tenso-

"See if this road continues around the back. The ranks will be by a toading area."

Jared drove slowly. There were many souls here going in and out of the facility some of them in scrubs. Healers. No one paid us any particular attention.

The road hugged the salewalk, then curved around the north side of the building complex.

"Look Shipping trucks. Head that way "

We passed between a wing of low buildings and a parking garage. Several trucks, delivering medical supplies no doubt, were backed into receiving ports. I scanned the crates on the dock, all labeled

"Keep going—though we might want to grab some of those on the way back. See — Hea — Gool — Stuly I wonder what that one is."

I liked that these supplies were abeled and left anguarded. My fam. v wouldn't go without the things they needed when I was gone. When I was gone it seemed that phrase was tacked on to all of my thoughts now.

We rounded the back of another banding. Jared drove a little faster and kept his eyes forward — there were people here, four of them unloading a cruck onto a dock. It was the exactness of their movements that caught my attention. They didn't handle the smallish boxes tough viguite the contrary, they placed their with infinite care onto the waist-high lip of concrete.

I didn't really need the tabe, for confirms ton, but just then, one of the unloaders turned his box so the black letters faced me directly

"This is the place we want. They're unloading occupied tanks righ now. The empty ones won't be far. Ah. There on the other side. That shed is half he of them. I'll bet the closed sheds are all the way for."

lared kept driving at the same careful speed, furning the corner to the side of the but ding.

He snorted quietly

"What?" I asked

"Figures, See?"

He lerked his thin toward the sign on the building.

This was the maternity wing.

"Ah" I said. "Well, you'll always know where to look won't you?"

His eyes flashed to my face when I said that, and then back to the road.

"We .. have to wait for a bat Looked see they were almost finished."

lared circ ed the hospital again, then parked at the back of the big gest lot, away from the lights

He killed the engine and slumped against the scat. He reached over and tuok my hand. I knew that he was about to ask, and I tried to prepare myself.

"Wanda?"

"Yese"

"You're going to save the Seeker aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Because it's the right thing to do?" he guessed

"That's one reason."

He was shent for a moment

"You know how to get the soul out without harting the body."

My heart thumped hard once and I had to swallow before I could answer. "Yes I've Jone it before. In an emergency. Not here."

"Where," he asked "What was the emergency?"

It was a story I a never told them before for obvious reasons. It was one of my best. Lots of action, Jamie would have loved it. I sighed and began in a low voice.

"On the Mists Planet. I was with my friend Harness Light and a garde I don't remember the guide's name. They called me Lives in the Stars there. I a ready had a bit of a reputation."

Jared chuckled.

"We were making a pilgrimage across the tourt, great at field to see one of the more celebrated crystal cities. It was supposed to be a safe route - that's why there were only three of as.

"Claw beasts like to dig puts and bury themselves in the snow Camouflage, you know. A trap.

"One moment there was nothing but the flat, endless snow Then the next moment it seemed like the entire field of while was exproding into the sky

"An average adult Bear has about the mass of a buffalo. A fungrown claw beast is closer to the mass of a bije whale. This one was bigger than most.

"I coulant see the ga de. The claw beast had sprang up between us, facing where Harness Light and I stood. Bears are faster than claw beasts, but this one had the advantage of the ambush. Its hoge stone, we process swooped down and sheared Harness Light in half before I'd really processed what was happening."

A car drove slowly down the side of the parking lot. We sat atlent until it had passed

"I hesitated I should have started running, but — my friend was dying there on the ice. Because of that hesitation, I would have died too if the claw beast hadn't been distracted. I found cut later that our guide — I wish a could remember his name. — had attacked the claw beast's tall hoping to give its a chance to run. The claw beast's attack had stirred up enough show that it was like a bilizard. The lack of visibility would help us escape. He didn't know it was a ready too late for Harness Light to run.

"The claw beast turned on the guide and his second left leg kicked as sending me flying. Harness Light's apper body landed beside me His blood melted the snow."

I paused to shudder

"My next action made no sense pecause I had no body for Harness Light. We were midway between cures, much too far to run to either. It was probably cruel too to take him out with no painkmers. But I couldn't stand to let him die inside the broken oalf of his Bear host.

"I used the back of my band — the are cutting side it was too wide a blade — It caused a lot of damage. I could only nope that Har ness Light was far gone enough that he wouldn't fee, the extra pain

"Usting my soft inside tingers. I conxed Harness Light from the Bear's brain.

"He was still alive. I have y paused to ascertain this. I shoved him also the egg pocket in the center of my body, between the two he test hearts. This would keep him from dying of cold, but he would only last a few short militates without a hody. And where would I find a host body in this empty waste?

"I thought of trying to share my host but I doubted I could stay conscious through the procedure to insert him into my own head. And then having no healing medicine. I would die quickly With all those hearts, Bears bled very fast.

"The claw beast roared and I feat the ground shake as its bage paws t moded down. I didn't know where our guide was, or if he lived. I didn't know how long it would take the claw beast to find us half baried in the snow I was right beside the severed Bear. The bright blood would have the monsters eyes.

"And then I got this crazy idea."

I paused to laugh quietly to myself

"I didn't have a Bear host for Harness Light. I couldn't use my hody. The guide was dead or had fled. But there was *one* other body on the ice field.

"It was insunity, but all I could think of was Harness Light. We weren't even close friends, but I knew he was slowly dving, right between my hearts. I couldn't end; re that

"I heard the angry claw beast roaring, and I ran toward the sound. Shon I could see its thick white fur. I ran straight to its third left leg and aunched myself as high up the leg as I could. I was a good umper I used all six of my hands the knite sides to yank myself up the side of the beast. It roared and spun, but that didn't help. Picture a dog chasing its ta. Claw beasts have very small brains. I a imited interligence.

"I made it to the beast's back and ran up the double spine id gging in with my krayes so that it couldn't shake me off

"It only took seconds to get up to the beast's head. But that was where the greatest difficulty waited. My deconters were only—about as long as your forearm, maybe. The claw beast's hide was twice as thick. I swung my arm down as hard as I could suish ng through the first layer of fur and membrane. The claw beast screamed and regred back on its hindmost legs. I almost ten

"I lodged four of my hands into its hide - it screamed and thrashed. With the other two I took turns cutting at the gash I d

made. The skip was so thick and ough, I didn't know if I would be able to saw through.

"The claw beast went berserk. It shook so hard that it was all I could do to hold on for a moment. But time was running out for Harness Light. I shoved my hands into the hole and it ed to rip it open

"Then the claw beast threw itself backward onto the ice

"If we hadn't been over its lair the pit it had dug to hide in, that would have crushed me. As it was though it knocked me silly, the fall acts a y helped. My knows were already in the beast's neck. When I hit the ground, the weight of the beast drove my cutters deep through its skin. Deeper than I needed.

"We were both stunned, I was half smothered. I knew I had to do something right away but I couldn't remember what it was. The heast started to row dazed. The fresh air cleared my head, and I remembered Harness Light.

"Protecting it in from the cold as we las I could in the soft's de of my hands, I moved him from my egg pocket into the claw beas sineck.

The beast got to its feet and backed again. This i me I flew off I dlet go of my hold to insert Harness Light, you see. The class brast was infuriated. The wound on its head wasn't nearly enough to kill it just annoy it.

"The snow had settled enough that I was in plain sight, especially as I was painted with the beast's blood. It is a very bright color a coint you don't have here. It raised its pincers, and they swang toward mc. I thought that was it, and I was comforted a little that at least I would die trying.

"And then the pincers bit the snow beside me. I couldn't believe it had missed. I stared up at the hage, hideous face, and I almost had to well, not augh. Bears at nit laugh. But that was the feeling. Be cause that ugly face was torn with confusion and surprise and chagtin. No claw beast had ever worm such an express; on before

"It had taken Harness Light a few minutes to bind himself to the claw beast. It was such a oig area he really had to extend himself. But then he was in control. He was confused and slow. The didn't have much of a brain to work with but it was enough that he knew I was his friend.

"I had to ride him to the crystal city—to hold the wound closed on his neck until we could reach a Healer. That caused quite a stirl por a while they called me Rides the Beast. I didn't like it. I made them go back to my other name."

I it been staring ahead, toward the lights of the hospital and the figures of the so its crossing in front of those lights, as I told the story. Now I looked at lared for the first time. He was gaping at me his eves wide and his mouth hanging open.

It ready tous one of my best stories. I'd have to get Mel to promise that she a tell it to Jamie when I was

"They re-probably finished among ug. don't you think?" I said quickly "Let's finish this and get back home."

He started at me for one more moment, and then shook his head slowly

"Yes let's fin shith s. Wanderer, Lives in the Stars, Rides the Beast Srealing a few unguarded crates won't present much of a challenge for you, will it?"

Separated

The brought our plander in through the south vent, though this meant that the reep would have to be moved before dawn. My main concern with using the bigger entrance was that the Seeker would hear the commotion our armys was sure to cause. I wasn't sure if she had any lices of what I was going to do, and I didn't wan, to give her any reason to kill her host and herself. The story Jeb had told me about one of their captives—the man who had simply collapsed, leaving no external evidence on the outside of the havor wreaked inside his sky. — baunted my thoughts.

The hospital was not empty. As I squeezed myself through the last tight puople of space out into the main room. I found Dot preparing for the operation. His cask was laid out: on it a propage lantern—the brightest main nation we had available—waited to be lif. The scale pels gained in the duller plue light of the solar lamp.

I had known that Doc would agree to my terms, but seeing him thus oct upied sent a wave of nervous nauses through me. Or maybe it

was just the memory of that other day that sickened me the day I digaught him with blood on his hands

"You're back " he said with relief. I realized that he dibeen worried about us, just as everyone worried when someone left the safety of the caves.

"We brought you a git," Jared said as he pushed himself free bebindine. He straightened up and reached back for a box. With a flour ish, he held it up, displaying the libel on the side.

"Heal " Doc crowed "How much dia you get?"

"Two cases. And we've found a much better way to renew our stores than to have Wanda stabbing herself."

Doe did not laugh at Jared's joke. Instead he turned to stare at me piercingly. We both must have been turnking the same thing. Convenient since Wanda won't be around.

"Did you get the cryotanks?" he asked, more subdiled

Jared nonced the look and the tension. He glanced at me, his expression impossible to read.

"Yes," I answered "Ten of them. It was all the car could hold."

While I spoke, lared vanked on the rope behind him. With a clatter of loose rock, the second box of Heal to lowed by the tanks, tumbted onto the floor behind him. The tanks clanked I ke metal though they were him it in no element that existed on this planet individed him it was fine to creat the circhy cryotanks toughly, they were built to withstand much worse abase than being togged through a stone channe. They gunted on the floor now looking shiny and pristing

Doc picked one up, freeing it from the rope, and turned it around in his hands.

"Ten?" The number secrets to surprise him. Did he think a too many? Or not enough? "Are they difficult to use?"

"No Extremely casy I II show you how"

Doc nouled his eyes examining the alien construction. I could teel lared witch by me but I kept my eyes on Doc

"What Jid Jeb. Brandt and Aaron save" I asked.

Doc looked up, locked his eyes on mane. "They re in agreement with your terms."

I nodued not convinced "I won't show you unless I believe that"

"That's fair"

lared glared at as, confused and frustrated

"What did you tell him?" Doc asked me, being cautious.

"Just that I was going to save the Seeker." I rurned to look in Jared's general direction without meeting his gaze. "Doc has promised me that if I show him how to perform the separation, you will give the released souts sate conduct to another life on another planet. No killing."

Jared nodded that gatfulty, his eyes flickering back to Doc. "I can agree to those terms. And I can make sure the others follow through I assume you have a plan to get them off planete."

"It will be no more dangerous than what we did ion ght. Just the opposite — adding to the stack rather than taking from it."

"Okay,"

"Did you have a time schedule in mind?" Doc asked. He tried to sound nonchalant, but I could hear the eagerness behind his voice.

He just wanted the answer that had educed it in for so long, I tried to tell myse fill wasn't that he was in a horry to keeping

"I have to take the seep back. Can you want! I'd like to water this."

"Sure, Jared," Doc agreed.

"Won't take mellong" Jared promised as he shoved himself back into the yent

That I was sure of It wouldn't take enough time at all.

Dot and I did not speak until the sound of Jared's scrambling exit had faded.

"You didn't talk about Melanier" he asked softly

I shook my head "I think he sees where this is going. He must guess my plan."

"But not all of it. He won't allow..."

"He won't get a say," I interrupted severely "A cor nothing. Doc."

Doc sighed. After a moment of sitence, he stretched and glanced toward the main exit. "I'm going to go talk to Jeb, get things ready."

He reached for a bottle on the table. The chloroform. I was sure the souls had something better to use. I would have to try to find it to: Doc. before I was gone.

"Who knows about this?"

"Still just leb Aaron, and Brance They all want to watch"

This didn't surprise me. Aaron and Brandt would be suspic ous "Don't tell anyone else. Not too ight."

Doc nodded, then he disappeared into the black corridor

I went to sit against the warr as far from the prepared cot as I could get. I'd have my turn on top of it all too soon

Trying to think of something besides that grin fact. I realized that I hadn't heard from Melanie since. When was the last time she dispracen to me? When I dimage the deal with Doc? I was betatedly surprised that the sleeping arrangements by the leep today had not elicited a reaction from her.

Mel?

No answer

It wasn't like before, so I didn't panic. I could defin to y feel her there in my head, but she was a lignoring me. What was she doing?

Mel? What's going on?

No answer

Are you may at me? I'm sorry about before by the seep I didn't do anything you know, so it's not ready lair

She interrupted me exasperated Oh, stop I m not mad at you Leave me alone

Why won't you talk to me?

No answer

I pushed a little harder, hoping to pick up the direction of her thoughts. She tried to keep me out, to put the wall in piace, but it was too weak from disuse. I saw her plan

Letted to keep my mental tone even. Have you lost your mind?

in a manner of speaking she teased ha fheartealy

You there that if you can make yourself disappear, that will stop me?

What else can I ao to stop you? If you be got a better take piease share

I am, . ge. ii, Melame Don't you want them back? Don't you want so be with Jared again? With Jamie?

She writhed fighting the obviousness of the answer Yes, but I can't. She took a moment to steady herself a fina myself totable in he the death of you. Wanda I can't stand it.

I saw the depth of her pain and tears formed in my eyes.

Love you too. Mel But there's not room for the both of us here in this body, in this cave, in their tives

I disagree.

Look just stop irving to annihilate yourself okal. Because if I think you can do it. In make Doc put me out today. Or In tell lared Just imagine what he would do.

I imagined it for her smiling a lift e through my tears. Remember? He said no guarantees about what he would or wouldne do to keep you here. I thought of those burning kisses in the hair thought of other kisses and other nights in her memory. My face warmed as I boushed.

You fight durty

You bet I do

I m not giving up

You've been warned. No more silent treatment

We thought of other things then things that didn't hart. Like where we would send the becker. Mel was all for the Mists Planet after my story tonight, but I shought the Planet of the Flowers would be more fitting. There wasn't a memower planet in the universe. The becker needed a race long a tetime eating sunshine.

We thought of my memories, the pretty ones. The ice last es and the night music and the colored sons. They were like tairytales to her And she told me tairytales, too. Class suppers, poisoned apples, mer maids who wanted to have souls...

Of course, we didn't have time to tell many stories.

They are returned together Jured had come back through the main entrance. It had taken so very rathe time — perhaps held just driven the jeep around to the north side and hidden it under the overhang there. In a hurry.

I beard their voices coming, subdued, scrious, low and knew from their tone that the Seeker was with them. Knew that the time had come for the first stage of my agath.

Nο

Pay attention. You're going to have to pelp, pem ao this when [m. No:

But she wasn't protesting my instruction—ast the conclusion of my thought.

Jared was the one who carried the Seeker into the room. He came first the others behind. Aaron and Brandt both had the guns ready—th case she was only feigning unconsciousness, perhaps, and about to

jump up and attack them with her tiny hands. Jeb and Doc came last, and I knew Jeb's conny eves would be on my face. How much had he figured out already with his crazy, insightful shrewdness?

I kept myself tocused on the task at hand

Jared and the Seeker's mert form on the cot with exceptional gentieness. This might have bothered me before, but now it touched me. I understood that he did this for me, wishing that he could have treated me this way in the beginning.

"Doc, where's the No Pain?"

"I'll get it for you," he murmured.

I stared at the Seeker's face while I waited, wondering what it would look like when her host was free. Would anything be left? Would the host be empty or woold the rightful owner reassert her self? Would the face be less repugnant to me when another awareness looked out of those eyes?

"Here you go." Doc put the canister in my hand.

"Thanks."

I pulled out one thin tissue square and handed the container back to him.

I found myself reluctant to touch the Seeker but I made my hands move swiftly and purposefully as I pulled her thin down and put the No Pain on her tongue. Her face was very small—it made my hands feel big. Her tiny size always threw me off. It seemed so map propriate.

I cosed her mouth again. It was moist the medicine would dis-

solve quickly.

"Jared, could you please roll her onto her stomach?" I asked

He did as I asked—again gent villust then, the propane lantern flared to life. The cave was suddenly bright, almost like day ght I glanced up instructively and saw that Doc had covered the big holes in the roof with tarps to keep our light from escaping. He didone a lot of preparation to our absence.

It was very quiet. I could hear the Seeker breathing evenly in and out. I could hear the faster tenser breathing of the men in the room with me. Someone shifted from one too, to the other, and sand ground against rock under his hee. Their stares had a physical weight on my skin.

jump up and attack them with her tiny hands. Jeb and Doc came last, and I knew Jeb's conny eves would be on my face. How much had he figured out already with his crazy, insightful shrewdness?

I kept myself tocused on the task at hand

Jared and the Seeker's mert form on the cot with exceptional gentieness. This might have bothered me before, but now it touched me. I understood that he did this for me, wishing that he could have treated me this way in the beginning.

"Doc, where's the No Pain?"

"I'll get it for you," he murmured.

I stared at the Seeker's face while I waited, wondering what it would look like when her host was free. Would anything be left? Would the host be empty or woold the rightful owner reassert her self? Would the face be less repugnant to me when another awareness looked out of those eyes?

"Here you go." Doc put the canister in my hand.

"Thanks."

I pulled out one thin tissue square and handed the container back to him.

I found myself reluctant to touch the Seeker but I made my hands move swiftly and purposefully as I pulled her thin down and put the No Pain on her tongue. Her face was very small—it made my hands feel big. Her tiny size always threw me off. It seemed so map propriate.

I cosed her mouth again. It was moist the medicine would dis-

solve quickly.

"Jared, could you please roll her onto her stomach?" I asked

He did as I asked—again gent villust then, the propane lantern flared to life. The cave was suddenly bright, almost like day ght I glanced up instructively and saw that Doc had covered the big holes in the roof with tarps to keep our light from escaping. He didone a lot of preparation to our absence.

It was very quiet. I could hear the Seeker breathing evenly in and out. I could hear the faster tenser breathing of the men in the room with me. Someone shifted from one too, to the other, and sand ground against rock under his hee. Their stares had a physical weight on my skin.

I swahowed, hoping I could keep my voice normal, "Doc I need Heal, Clean, Seal, and Smooth."

"Right here."

I brushed the Seeker's coarse black hair out of the way exposing the lattle pink line at the base of her skill. I started at her olive tan skill and hesitated.

"Would you cut Doc? I don! I don't want to "

"No problem, Wanda."

I saw only his hands as he came to stand across from me. He set a little row of white cylinders on the cot next to the Seeker's shoulder. The scalper winked in the bright light flashing across my face.

"Hold her hair out of the way."

I used both hands to clear her neck

"Wish I could scrub up," Doc mattered to himse f, obviously feering underprepared

"It's not really necessary. We have Clean."

"I know" He sighed. What he really wanted was the routine, the mental cleansing that the old habits had given him.

"How much room do you need?" he asked besitating with the point of the blade an inch from her skin

I could fee, the heat of the other bodies betrind me, squeezing in to get a better view. They were careful not to touch either of us

"Just the length of the scar That will be enough."

This didn't seem like enough to him "You sure?"

"Yes. Oh, wan"

Doc pulled back.

I realized I was doing this all backward. I was no Healer I wasn't out out for this. My hands were shaking. I couldn't seem to look away from the Seeker's body.

"Jared could you get one of those tanks for mee"

"Of course"

I heard him walk the few steps away heard the dull, metallic of hig of the tank he chose knocking against the others

"What now?"

"There's a carele on top of the aid. Press at in."

I heard the low hi m of the cryotank as it powered on. The men multered and shuffled their feet, moving away from it

"Okay, on the side there should be a switch — more like a dial. actually. Can you see it?"

"Yes."

"Spin it a., the way down."

"Okay."

"What cour is the light on top of the tank-"

"It's as just turning from purple of bright blue Light blue now."

I took a deep breath. At least the tanks were functional

"Great. Pop the fid and want for me."

"How?"

"Latch under the lip."

"Got at" I heard the cack of the latch, and then the what of the mechanism. "It's cotd."

"That's sort of the point"

'How does it work? What's the power source?"

I sighed "I knew the answers when I was a Spider I don't under stand it now. Doc. you can go ahead. I'm ready."

"Here we go." Doc whispered as he slid the blade of the scarpel deltay almost gracefully, through the skin. Blood coursed down the side of her neck, pooring on the towel Doc had placed underneath

"Ait ny bit deeper Just under the edge.

"Yes I see " Doc was breathing tast, excited

Silver glinted out from the red.

"That's good. Now you held the hair"

Doc switched places with me in a smooth iswittim avenuent. He was good at his Cauling. He would have made quite a Heater

I didn't try to hide what I was doing from him. The movements were too minute for him to have any chance of seeing. He would not be able to do this until I explained.

I slid one fingertip carefully along the back indge of the tinvisitiver creature until my finger was almost entirely inserted into the hot opening at the base of the host body's neck. I traced my way to the anterior antennae, feeling the taut lines of the bound attachments stretched tight, ke harp strings into the deeper recesses of her head.

I twisted my finger around the uncurside of the souls body

caressing down from the first segment along the other line of attachments, as stiff and profuse as the brist es of a brush

I fell carefully at the uncture of these tight strings, at the tiny joints no bigger than pinheads. I stroked my way about a third of the way down. I could have connied, out that would have taken a very long time. It would be the two hundred seventeenth connection, but there was another way to find it. There it was the infle hidge that made this limit just a bit bigger—a seed pearl rather than a pinhead. It was smooth under my fingertip.

I pressed against it with gentle pressure, tenderly massaging. Kindness was a ways the way of the souls. Never violence

"Relax," I breathed.

And though the soul could not hear me, it obeyed. The harp strings loosened, went stack I could feel the slather as they retracted, feel the slight swelling of the body as it absorbed them. The process took no more han a few beats of my heart. The dimy breath and I felthe soul undulate under my touch. Wriggling free

Her trivist iself a little farther out, and then I curied my fingers gently around the tiny fragule body. Hifred it, so ver and glearning, wet with blood that was quick yished from the smooth casing, and cracked it in my hand.

It was beautiful. The soul whose name I'd never known billowed like a sliver wave in my hand——a lovely teathered ribbon.

I couldn't hate the Seeker in this form. An almost maternal love swept through me

"Sleep well, I'ttie one" I winspered.

I turned toward the taint hum of the cryotank, just to my left, Jared held it low and angled so it was a simple matter for me to ease the sour into the shock high cold air that gusted from the opening. Het it sude nto the small space and then carefully relaiched the lid.

I took the cryotank from Jared, easing it rather than fugging it, turning it with care until it was vertical, and then I hugged it to my chest. The outside of the tank was the same temperature as the warm room. I cradled it to my body protective as any mother.

Looked back at the stranger on the table. Doe was already dusting Smooth over the scaled wound. We made a good team, one attending to the soul, the other to the hody. Everyone was taken care of

Doc looked up at me his eyes full of exhitaration and wonder "Amazarg," he mirrorized "That was incredible."

"Good job," I whispered back.

"When do you think sae II wake up?" Doc asked

"That depends on now much chioroform she inhaled."

"Not much "

"And if s.ie's still there. We'll have to wait and see."

Before I could ask, lared lifted the nameless woman tenderly from the cot, rolled her face up, and laid her on another, cleaner resting place. This tenderness did not move me. This tenderness was for the human, for Melanie...,

Doc went with him checking her pulse, peeking under her lids. He shone a flash ight into her unconscious eyes and watched the pupil's constrict. No light reflected back to blind him. He and lared exchanged a long glance.

"She really like a " Jared said, b s voice low.

"Yes," Doc agreed

I didn't hear Jeb sidle up next to me.

"Pretty slick, kid," he murmured.

I shrugged.

"Feeling a smidge conflicted?"

I didn't answer

"Yeah Me, too, hon. Me too."

Aaron and Brandt were talking behind melitheir voices using with exertement lanswering each other's thoughts before the questions were spoken.

No conflict there

"Watt till the others hear!"

"Think of the -- "

"We should go get some

"Right now, I'm ready

"Hord up" Jeb out Brandt off. "No sou, snatching ant , that cryotank is sate you its way into outer space. Right. Wandar"

"Right" I agreed in a firmer voice hugging the tank tighter to my chest.

Brandt and Aaron exchanged sour glances.

I was going to need more alices, Jared and Jeb and Doc were only

three though certainly the most influential three here. Still they would need support.

I knew what this meant.

It means talking to Ian.

Others, too, of course but Ian would have to be one of them. My heart seemed to slump lower in niv caest, to curl imply in or itself. I'd done many things I had not wanted to do since joining the humans but I couldn't remember any this sharply and pointedly painful. Even deciding to trade my life for the Seeker's — that was a huge wast hurr, a wide held of ache, but it was almost manageable because it was so tied up to the bigger picture. Teiling Ian goodbye was a razor sharp piercing it made the greater vision hard to see. I wished there was some way, any way, to save him from the same pain. There wasn't

The only thing worse would be telling fared goodbye. That one would burn and fester Because he around tee, path. His joy would far outweigh any small regret be hight feel over me.

As for Jamie, well, I wasn't planning on tacing that goodbye at al. "Wandat" Doo's voice was sharp.

I harried to the bed Doc was hovering over Before I got there, I could see the tiny olive hand fisting and anhating where it hang over the edge of the cot.

"Ah," the Seeker's familiar voice moaned from the human body "Ah."

The room went atterty silent. Everyone looked at me as if I were the expert on humans.

I elbowed Doc my hands st. wrapped around the tank. "Talk to her," I whispered.

"Um He or Can you near me miss? You're safe now Do you understand me?"

"Ah" she grouned. Her eyes fluttered open focused quickly on Doc's take. There was no discomfort in her expression—the No Palin would be making her feel wonderful inflicutors. Her eyes were or yk black. They darred around the room until she found me, and recognition was quickly to lower hy a scowl. She looked away back to Doc

"Well it teels good to have my head back," she said in a loud, clear voice. "Thanks,"

Condemned

ne Seeker's host body was named Lacey a dainty soft, fem nine name Lacey. As mappropriate as the size, in my opinion. Like naming a pit bull Fluffy

Lacey was just as loud as the Seeker and still a complainer

"You'll have to forgive me for going on and on" she insisted, a lowing us no other options. "Two been shouting away in there for years and never getting to speak for myself. I've got a lot to say a stored up."

How lucky for us I could almost make myself glad that I was

leaving

In answer to my earlier question it myself no the face was not less repugnant with a different awareness behind it. Because the awareness was not so very different in the end.

"That's why we don't like you." she told me that first night, making no change from the present tense or the planal pronot ni "When she realized that you were bearing Melanic just the way she was hearing me at made her frightened. She thought you might guess. I was her

deep, dark secret." A grating at gh. "She couldn't make me shut up. I hat's why she became a Seeker, because she was hoping to figure out some way to better deal with resistant hosts. And then she requested being assigned to you, so she could watch how you did it. She was real-ous of your isn't that pathetic? She wanted to be strong ake you. It gave us a real kick when we thought Melanie had won. I guess that didn't happen, though, I guess you did. So why did you come here? Why are you helping the rebels?"

I explained, anyillingly, that Me anic and I were friends the didn't like that

"Why?" she demanded.

"She's a good person"

"But why does she ...ke you?"

Sanse reason

"She says, for the same reason."

Lacey shorted "Got her oranwashed, high?"

Wow, she's worse than the first one

Yes I agreed I can see why the Seeker was so obnoxious. Can you amogine having that in your head all the time?

I wasn't the only thing Lacry objected to.

"Do you have anywhere better to ve than these caves? It's so derry here usn't there a house somewhere maybe? What do you mean we have to share rooms? Chore schedule? I don't understand. I have to work? I don't think you understand."

leb had given her the usual four the next day trying to explain through clenched teeth, the way we all lived here. When they dipassed me — eating in the kitchen with Ian and lamie — he threw me a look that clearly asked why I hadn't let Aaron shoot her while that was still an option.

The to a was more crowded than mine. Everyone wanted to see the maracle for themselves. It didn't even seem to matter to most of them that she was — difficult. She was welcome. More than we come Again, I felt a little of that bittet jealousy. But that was a ly. She was human. She represented hope. She belonged here. She would be here long after I was gone.

Lucky you. Me. waspered sarcastically

Talking to Ian and Jamie about what had happened was not as difficult and painful as I'd imagined.

This was because they were for different reasons, entirely clueless. Neither grasped that this new knowledge meant I would be leaving.

With Jamie 1 understood why More than anyone eise he had accepted me and Mel as the package deal we were. He was able with his young, open mind, to grasp the reality of our dual personalities. He treated as like two people tather than one. Me, was so read so present to him. The same way she was to me. He didn't miss her because he had her. He didn't see the necessity of our separation.

I wasn't sure why lan didn't understand. Was he too caught, puntithe potential? The changes this would mean for the human society here? They were all boggled by the idea that getting caught—the end—was no longer a finality. There was a way to come back. It seemed natural to him that I had acted to save the Secker—t was considered at the deconsidered at.

Or maybe Ian just d'un't have a chance to think it all through, to see the giaring eventuality before he was distracted. Distracted and enraged.

"I should have killed han years ago," Ian ranted as we packed what we needed for or make. My final raid. I tried not to dwell on that. "No our mother should have drowned him at birth!"

"He's your brother."

"I don't know why you keep saying that Are you trying to make he feel worse?"

Everyone was turnous with Kyle Jared's lips were weided into a tight line of rage, and Jeb stroked his gun more toan ist at

Jeb had been excited plant togue join as on this landmark to differ first since I dicome to live here. He was particularly keen to see the shuttle field tip close. But now with Kyle putting as all in danger, he felt he had to stay bettind just in case. Not getting his way put Jeb in a fold mood.

"Stuck behind with that creature," he mattered to himself rubbing he title parted again. The wasn't getting any happier about the new member of his commanity. "Missip aut the fun." He spit on the floor.

We as knew we are Kyle was. As soon as held grasped how the Seeker worm had magicalled transformed into the Laceviti man in their ght, he dispiped out he back I dibect expecting him to ead the party demanding the Seeker's death. I kep the cryotank aways cradled nimy arms I stept phily my hand out highes smooth surface by he was nowhere to be found and enhald quasted the resistance easily in his absence.

Jared was the one to realize the jeep was gone. And Ian had been the one to link the two absences.

". les gone after Jod." Ian had groaned. "What eise ? "

Hope and despate I had given them she Kele the other. Whilid he betray them all before they could even make use of the hope?

Isrea and leb wanted to put off the rail and we knew if Kyle was successful. It would take him three days under the best a ream stances if his loci still yed in Oregon. If he could have her to ere

There was another place another cave we could evaluate to. A much smaller place with no water so we couldn't hide there long. They didebated whether they should move everythe now or wait.

But I was in a hurry I a seen the way the cheers eyed, he so ver rank at my arms. I diheard, he whispers. The longer I kept the Seeker here the better chance that someone would keeper. Having mer Lacey, I dibegun to pity the Seeker. She deserved a mile inleasant new life with the Flowers.

Ir mically enough. Ian was the one wild ook my side and hetped harm the raid along the still daing see where this would lead

But I was grateful that he he pell the convince fared there was time to make the raid and get back before a decision was made about Kele Graneful also that he was back to play up bod guard. I knew I could trust lan with the shirty cryotank more than anytime else. He was the only the I would et hote I when I needed my arms. He was the my one who could see in the subject of that small container a me to be protected. He could think of that shape as a friend something that could be used. He was the best a wort all. I was so grateful for Ian and so grateful to the polyumaness that saved him for the moment from pain.

We had to be tas on ease Kya rouned everything. We went to Phoenix again to one of the many communities that span out from

the bith. There was a big shuttle field to the southeast in a lown called. Mesa, with several Healing tall lives nearby. That was what I wanted. I would give them as much as I could before I left. It we rook a Healer then we might be able to preserve the I lealer's memory in the host body. Someone who understood a little medicines and their uses. Someone who knew the best ways to get to unaltended stashes. Doc would love that I could imagine all the questions held be dying to ask.

First the shuttle field

I was sad that Job was in soing his but hold have so many other chances in the future. Though it was dark a long line of small snob nosed shuides drifted in to land while others took if ghr in an endless stream.

I drove the old van while the others rode in the back — lan in charge of the tank of colorse. I circled the field staying clear of the basy ocal erminal it was easy to spot the vast slock white vesses that left the planet. They did not depart with the frequency of the smaller ships. All I saw were docked none preparing to leave immediately.

"Everything's labeled," I reported to the others invisible in the cark back. "Now this is important Avoid ships to the Bats and especially the See Weeds. The See Weeds are just one system over—it takes only a decade to make the round trip. That's much too short. The Flowers are the farthest, and the Dolphins. Bears, and Spicers all take at least a century to go one way. Only send tanks to those."

I drove slowly, close to the crafts.

"This was he easy. They we got a likings of delivery vehicles out here and we blend in ()h' I can see a la kitrick litis pist, ke the one we saw them unloading at the hospita. Tared. There a man looking over the stacks. It is posting them into a hover carr. He's going to had them. "I drove even slower trying to get a good look. "Yes onto this slap. Right into the open hatch. It carrie back and make my move when he's in the ship." I put led past, examining the scene in my mirrors. There was a lit sign beside the tabe that contrected the head of the ship to the terminal. I stitled as I read he words backward. This ship was going to the Flowers. It was meant to be

I made a sink form as the man disat peared in o the hall of the ship.

Cret ready "I whispered as I puned into the shadow made by the colinerical wing of the next enormous ship over I was only three or

four yards from the tank truck. There were a few technicians working near the front or the Flower bound vessel and others, farther away, out on the old runway, a would be just another figure in the night

I cut the engine and hopped down from the driver's seat, trying to took casua. Ke I was only doing my job. I went around to the back of the van and opened the door a crack. The tank was right at the edge the light on top glowing dial red.'s gnifying that it was occupied. I lifted it carefully and closed the door.

I kept up an easy roung pace as I walked to the open end of the truck. But my breat ting sped up. This telt more dangerous than the hospital and that work ed me. Could respect my humans to risk their lives this way?

I ll be there I is as a myself, just the you would. On the off chance you get your way, that is

Thanks, Mel

I had to force myse thoo to keep glabeing over my shoulder at the open halch where the man had disappeared. I placed the lank gently atop the closest column in the truck. The addition one among hundreds, was not noticeable.

"Goodbye." I whispered "Better luck with your next host."

I wanted back to the van as slowly as I could stand to.

was such in the van as I reversed out from under the big ship. I started back the way we'd come my heart hammering too tast. In my mirrors, the hatch remained empty. I didn't see the man emerge before the ship was out of sight

lan climbed into the passenger seat. "Doesn't look too bard."

"It was very good luck with the timing You in ght have to wait longer for an opportunity next time."

lan reached over to take my hand. "You're the good luck charm."

I didn't answer

"Do you fee hetter now that she's safe?"

"Yes."

I saw his head turn sharply as he heard the alrexpected sound of a lie in my voice. I didn't meet his gaze

"Let's go catch some Healers." I muttered.

Ian was silent and thoughful as we drove the short distance to the small Healing facility

I dithought the second task would be the chanenge, the danger. The plan was that I would in the conditions and numbers were right in try to lead a Heater or two out of the facility under the pretext that I had an in ared friend in my van. An old trick, but one that would work only too well on the unsuspecting, trusting Healers.

As it turned out I didn't even have to go in I pulled into the lot just as two middle aged Heaters, a man and a woman wearing purple scrups were getting into a car. Their shift over they were heading home. The car was around the corner from the entrance. No one else was in sight.

Ian nedded tensely

I stopped the van right behind their car. They looked up, surprised.

I opened my door and sud out. My voice was thick with tears my face twisted with remorse, and that helped to fool them.

"My friend is in the back. I don't know what's wrong with him."

They responded with the instant concern I knew they would show. I harried to open the back doors for them, and they followed right behind. Ian went around the other side. Jared was ready with the chloroform.

I didn't watch.

It those just seconds. Jared has led the unconscious bodies into the back, and I an started at my tear swollen eyes for just a second, then took the driver's seat.

I rode shotgan. He held my band again

"Sorry, Wanda I know this is hard for you"

"Yes." He had no idea how hard, and for how many different reasons

He squeezed my fingers. "But that went well at least. You make an excellent charm."

Too we... Both missions had gone too perfectly, too fast. Fate was rushing me.

He drove back toward the freeway After a few minutes. I saw a bright, fam this sign in the distance. I took a deep breath and wiped my eyes clear.

"Ian, could you do me a favor?"

"Anything you want."

"I want fast food."

rie laughed. "No probiem."

We switched seats in the parking let, and I drove up to the ordering box

"What do you want?" I asked Ian.

"Nothing I migetting a kick out of watching you do something for yourself. This has to be a first."

I didn't smale at his joke. To me, this was sort of a last mea. — the final gaft to the condemned. I wouldn't leave the caves again.

"Jared, how about you?"

"Two of whatever you're having,"

So I ordered three cheeseburgers, three bags of fries, and three strawberry shakes.

After I got my food. Ian and I switched again so I could eat while he drove.

"Eaw" he said, watching me dip a french fry into the shake.

"You should try it. It's good "I offered him a well coated fry.

He strugged and took it. He popped it into his mouth and chewed "Interesting."

I is, ghed. "Melanie thinks it's gross, too." That's way I'd cultivated the habit in the beginning. It was funny now to think how I digund out of my way to annoy her

I wasn't really hungry. I doust wanted some of the flavors I particularly remembered, one more time. Ian finished off half my burger when I was full.

We made it home without incident. We saw noisign of the Seekers surveil ance. Perhaps they diacrepted the coincidence. Maybe they thought it neverable wander the desert alone long enough, and something bad would happen to you. We dihad a saying the that on the Mists Planet. Gross too many ice fields alone, and wind up a claw beasily meal. That was a rough translation. It sounded better in Beat.

There was a large reception waiting for us.

I smalled halfhearted y at my friends. Trudy Geotfrey Heath, and He di. My trud friends were dwinding. No Walter, no Wes. I didn't know where L. y was. This made me sad. Maybe I didn't want to live or this sad planet with so much death. Maybe noth ngness was better.

It also made me sad petry as it was, to see Lucina standing beside

Lacey, with Reid and Violetta on the other side. They were taking animated y asking questions in looked like. Lacey was holding freedom on her hip. He didn't look especially through being part of the adults' conversation that he didn't squirm down,

I direver been anowed near the child but Lacey was a ready one of them. Trusted.

We went straight to the south tunnel, lated and Ian laboring under the weight of the Healers. Ian had the heavier one, the man, and sweat ran down his fair face. Jeb shooed the others back at the tunnel cotrance and then followed us.

Doc was waiting for us in the hospital rubbing his bands together absently, as if washing them.

Time continued to speed up. The brighter lamp was it. The Healers were given No Pain and aid out facedown on the cots. Jared showed. Ian how to activate the tanks. They he at them reads, Ian winding at the stunning cold. Doc stood over the temale scalpe, in hand and medicines laid out in a row.

"Wanda?" he asked.

My heart squeezed i ward painfully "Do you swear, Doc" All of my terms? Do you promise me on your own life."

"I do I will meet all of your terms. Wanda I swear it."

"Tared?"

"Yes. Absolutely no killing, ever"

"land"

". . protect them with my own life Wanda"

"Jeb#"

"Irs my house. Anyone who can tablde by this agreement will have to get out."

I nodded rears in my eyes. "Okay then Let's get it over with."

Doc excited again our into the Healer until he could see the silver gleam. He set the scalpe, quickly as de "Now what?"

I put my hand on his.

"Trace up the back range. Can you fee, that? Fee, the shape of the segments. They get smaller lowerd the anterior section. Okay at the end you should fee, three smaller stubby things. Do you feel what I'm talking about?"

"Yes," he breathed.

"Good Those are the antenor antennae Start there Now very gent y, roll your finger an ler the body. Find the line of attachments. They is feel tight, like wires,"

He nodded.

I guided him a third of the way down rold film how to count if he wasn't sare. We didn't have time for counting with all the blood flowing free. I was sure the Healer's body it she came around, would be able to help us there must be something for that. I helped him find the biggest nodule.

"Now rub softly in toward the body. Knead a lightly."

Does voice went up in pitch, turned a little panicky "It's moving"

"That's good —it means you're doing it right. Give it time to retract. Wait tall it rous up a bit, then take it into your hand."

"Okay:" His voice shook

I reached toward Ian "Give me your hand"

I feat lank hand wind around mare. I turned at over curled his hand into a cup, and pulsed it close to Docks operation site.

"Give the soul to Ian - gently piease"

In would be the perfect assistant. When I was gone, who else would take such care with my little relatives?

Doc passed the socianto lans waiting hand, they curried at once to hear the human body.

Ian stated at the silver ribbon in his hand, his face full of wonder rather than revulsion. It felt warmer inside my chest while I watched his reaction.

"It's pretty," he whispered, surprised. No matter how he felt about me he dibeen conditioned to expect a parasite is centipede a monster. Cleaning up severed bodies had not prepared him for the beauty here.

"I think so, too. Let it saids into your tank."

lan held the soul cupped in his hand for one more second as if memor zing the sight and feel. Then with delicate care he let it guide into the cold.

lated showed him how to latch the lid.

A weight fell off my shoulders.

as was done. It was too late to change my mind. This didn't feel as

horrible as I dianticipated, because I felt sure these four humans would care for the souls just as I would. When I was gone

"Look ou." Jeb suddenly shouted. The gun came up in his hands, pointed past us.

We whilled toward the danger, and Jared's tank fell to the floor as he jumped toward the male Healer who was on his knees on the cot staring at us in shock. Ian had the presence of mind to hold on to his tank.

"Chloroform." Jared shouted as he tackled the Healer pinning him back down to the cor. But it was too late.

The Healer stared straight at me has face childlike in his bewilderment. I knew why his eyes were on me the lantern's rays danced off both his eyes and mine, making diamond patterns on the wall.

"Why?" he asked me

Then his face went blank, and his body slumped, unresisting, to the cot. Two trails of blood flowed from his nostrils

"No"" I screamed, larching to his mert form, knowing it was far too late "No""

Forgotten

hzabethe" I asked. "Annes Karene What's your names C'mon I know you know it."

The Heater's body was still imp on the cot. It had been a long time—how long, I wasn't sure. Hours and bours. I hadn't slept yet though the sun was far up in the sky. Doc had elimbed out onto the mountain to pull the timps away, and the sun beamed orightly through the hotes in the ceiling, hot on my skin. I'd moved the nameless woman so that her face would be out of the glare.

I touched her face now lightly, patting the soft brown hair woven through with white strands, away from her face.

"Julie" Brittany" Angelas Patricias Am I getting closes Talk to me. Please?"

Everyone but Doc — snoring quietly on a cot in the darkest corner of the hospital — had gone away hours ago. Some to bury the host body we'd lost. I cringed think ng of his bewildered question, and the sadden way his face had gone stack.

Why? he'd asked me

I so much wished that the soul had waited for an answer so I could have tried to explain it to him. He might even have understood. After all what was more important, in the end, than love? To a soul, wasn't that the heart of everything? And love would have been my answer.

Maybe if he'd waited he would have seen the truth of that. It he direally unders ood. I was sure he would have let the human body dve.

The request would probably have made little sense to him though. The body was bis body not a separate entity. His suicide was simply that to him not a murair too. Only one the bad ended. And perhaps he was right.

At least the social had survived. The light on his tank glowed dull red beside hers, I couldn't ask for a greater evidence of commitment from my humans than this the sparing of his life.

"Mary? Margaret? Susan? J.L.?"

Though Doc slept and I was otherwise alone. I could feel the echo of the tension the others had left behind, it still hung in the air.

The tension ingered because the woman had not woken up when the enteroform were off. She had not moved. She was still breathing, her heart was still beating but she had not responded to any of Doc's efforts to revive her.

Was it too late? Was she lost? Was she already gone? Just as dead as the male body?

Were all of them? Were there only a very tew like the Seeker's host Lacey, and Meian e — the shouters the resisters — who could be brought back? Was everyone else gone?

Was Lacey an anomaly? Would Melanic come back the way she had . . . or was even that in question?

I'm not lost I'm here. But Mel's menta, voice was defensive. She wormed, too.

Yes, you are here And you was stay here. I prumised

With a sigh. I returned to my efforts. My doomed efforts?

It was better than nothing I thought glim v. At least I'd given them a way to help themselves if they were ever taken I could help the resisters if no one ease.

lt didn't seem like enough

"You're not giving me much to work with "I murmured. I took her hand it both of more chalcular scietly "it would really be nice if you would make an effort. My friends are going to be depressed enough. They could use some good news. Besides, with Kvie still, gone. It will be hard to evacually everyone without having to carry you around too. I know you want to help. This is your lamity here you know. These are your kind. They revery nice. Mos. of them. You II., ke them."

The gently lined face was vacant with unconsciousness. She was quite pretty in a niconspicuous way in her features very symmetrical on her oval face. Forty five maybe a little younger in able a little older. It was hard to tell with no animation in the face.

They need you? I went on pleading now. You can be pithem You know so much that I never knew. Due tries so hard. He deserves some help. He's a good man. You've been a Healer for a while now some of that care for the we. being of others must have rubbed off on you. You'l, like Due, I think

"Is your name Sarah? Em 32 Kristing."

I stroked her sout check that there was no response, so I took her limt hand in mine again. I gazed at the blue sky through the holes in the high ceiling. My mind wandered

"I wonder what they is do if Kyle never comes back. How long was they bruck." I they have to find a new home somewhere else? There are so many of hem. It won't be easy I wish I could be pichem by a even it I could stay. I won't have any answers.

"Maybe they II get to stay here—somehow Maybe Kyle won't mess up." I aughed a nonessly thinking of the ouds Kyle wasn't a careful man. However until hat situation was resolved I was needed. Maybe if there were Seekers look, ig., her wor id need my man hie eyes. It might take a long time and that made me fee, warmet than the sun on my skin. Maile me lee, graceful that Kyle was impetuous and selfish. How long into we were sure we were safe?

"I winder what its like here when it gets cold. I can parely remember technique ad. And what if it rains? It has to rain here some time, doesn't the With all these holes in the root it must get really wet. Where accessive everyone sleep then it wonder." It is ghed. "Maybe I li get to had our Probably should it bet on that though Aren't you cur ous at all of you would wake up, you could get the answers. I'm carlous

Maybe I'll ask Ian about it It's turny to magine things changing here. I guess summer can't last forever."

Her fingers flattered for one second in my hand

It took me by surprise because my mind had wandered away from the woman on the cot-beginning to sink into the melancholy that was always conveniently near these days

I stared down at her, there was no change — the hand in mine was limp, her face still vacant. Maybe I d imagined the movement

"Did I say something you were micros ed in? What was I talking about?" I thought quickly watching her face. "Was it the rain? Of was it the idea of change? Change? You've got a lot of that ahead of you don't you? You have to wake up first, though."

Her face was empty, her hand motionless.

"So you don't care for change. Can't say that I is ame you. I don't want change to come, either. Are you like me? Do you wish the summer could sast?"

If I hadn't been watching her face so closely. I wouldn't have seen the tiny flicker of her aids.

"You like sun mertime do you?" I asked hopefully

Her lips twitched.

"Summer?"

Her hand trembled

"Is that your name — Summer? Summer? That's a pretty name." Her hand tightened into a fist, and her ups parted

"Come back, Summer I know you can do it Summer? Lis en to me, Summer Open your eyes. Summer "

Her eyes blinked rapidly

"Doc" I called over my shoulder "Doc wake up "

"Huh?"

"Ith nk she's coming around." I turned back to the woman "Keep it up, Summer You can do this I know it's hard Summer Summer Summer. Open your eyes."

Her face grimsced was she in pain?

"Bring the No Pain, Doc, Hurry."

The woman squeezed my hand and her eyes opened. They didn't for is at first, just whirled around the bright cave. What a strange, inexpected sight this place must have been for her

"You're going to be all right, Summer You're going to be fine. Can you hear me, Summere"

Her eyes wheeled back to me, the pupils constricting. She stared, absorbing my race. Then she cringed away from me, twisting on the cot to escape. A low, hourse any of panic broke through her aps.

"No, no, no," she cried. "No more."

"Doc!"

He was there, on the other side of the cortain before when we were operating

"It's okay, malam," he assured her "No one is going to hart you here."

The woman had her eves squeezed shut, and she recoiled into the thin mattress.

"I think her name is Summer"

He flashed a look at me and then made a tace "Eves Wanda," he breathed

I be taked and realized that the sun was on my face. "Oh." I let the woman put her hand free

"Don't please" the woman begged. "Not again"

"Shin." Doc marmared. Summer People call me Doc. No one's going to do anything to you. You're going to be fine."

Leased away from them anti-the shadows

"Don't call me that " the woman sobbed. "That's not my name. It's hers, it's hers! Don't say it again."

I'd gotten the wrong name.

Me, objected to the gc t that washed through me. It not your fault Summer is a human name, too

"Of course not," Doc promised " What is your name?"

"I — I — , don't know'" she walled. "What happened? Who was Ir Don't make me be someone else again "

She tossed and thrashed on the cot

"Ca milk whillt's going to be okay. I promise No one's going to make you be anyone but you, and you'll remember your name. It's going to come back."

"Who are your" she domanded "Who's sher She's like I was. I saw her eyes!"

"I'm Doc. And I'm human just like you. Seer" He moved his face

into the light and blinked at her "We're both just ourselves. There are lots of humans here. They if he so happy to meet you."

She or nged again "Humans, I'm afraid of bumans."

"No, you're not. The person who used to be in your body was afraid of humans. She was a some remember that? And then remember hetere that, before she was there? You were human then, and you are again."

"L'ean t remember my name " she tolu him in a panicked voice.

"I know. It II come back."

"Are you a doctor?"

"I am

"I was — she was, 100. A — Healer Like a doctor. She was Summer Song. Who am I?"

"We'll find out I promise you that."

I edged toward the exit. Trudy would be a good person to help. Doc, or maybe Heidi. Someone with a calming face.

"She's not haman," the woman whispered argently to Doc, her eye chight by my movement.

"She's a friend, don't be alreid. She helped me bring you back."

"Where is Summer Song? She was scared. There were hu-

I ducked out the door while she was distracted.

I heard Duc answer the question behind me. "She's going to a new planet. Du you remember where she was before she came here?"

I could guess what her answer would be from the name

She was a Batz She could fly. She could sing. I remember but it was not here. Where am Iz?"

I harried down the half to find help for Doc I was surprised when I saw the light of the great cavern ahead — surprised necessed it was so quiet I shamy you could hear voices before you saw the light. It was the middle of the day. There should have been someone in the big garden room, if only crossing through.

I walked out into the bright noon light, and the gant space was

empty

The fresh tendrals of the cantaloupe vines were dark green darker than the dry earth they sprang from. The carta was too dry—the righting barrel stood ready to fix that, the hoses laid out along the

furrows. But no one manned the crude machine. It sat abandoned on the sade of the field.

I stood very stall, trying to hear something. The bage cavern was slent, and the silence was ominous. Where was everyoner

Had they evacuated without mer. A pang of fear and hart shot through me. But they wou do't have left without Doc of course. They would never leave Doc. I wanted to dark back through the long tunnel to make sure. Doc had not disappeared, too.

They wouldn't leave us behind

You'r right You're right Let's check the kitchen?

I jugged down the silent corridor getting more anxious as the silence continued. Maybe it was my imagination, and the loud it umping of my pulse in my ears. Of course there must be something to hear. If I could calm down and slow my breathing. I'd be able to hear voices.

But I reached the kitchen and it was empty too. Empty of people On the tables, half-eaten, unches had been abandoned. Peanut buffer on the last of the soft bread. Apples and warm cans of social

My stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten at all today but I bare y noted the twist of nunger. The panic was so much stronger

What if usbat if we aidn't evacuate soon enough -

No Mel gasped No we would have beard something Sometime would have or there would be. They a still be here, looking for as They wouldn't give up with they it cheeken everywhere. So that can the it

Unless they're looking for us now

I spun back toward the door my eyes darting through the shadows.

I had to go warn Doc. We had to get out of here if we were the last two.

No! They can in gone Jamie, lared. Their faces were so clear as if they were exched onto the insides of my eye ads.

And lan's face, as I added my own pietores to hers feb. Trudy Lily, Heath Geoffrey Wolf get them back I vowed. We li bunt them down one by one and stead them back! I won let them take my family!

If I d had any doubts where I stood this moment would have

erased them. I dinever felt so herce in all my Lives. My reeth clenched tight, snapping together audibly.

And then the noise the babble of voices I'd been so anxiously straining to hear echoed down the half to us and made my breath catch. I slid silently to the walf and pressed myself into the shadow there, listening.

The big garden You can hear it in the echoes

Sounds like a large group

Yes But yours or mme?

Ours or theirs, the corrected.

I crept down the hall keeping to the parkest shadows. We could hear the voices more clearly now, and some of them were familiar. Did that mean anything? How long would it take trained Seekers to perform an insertion?

And then, as I reached the very mouth of the great cave, the sounds became even clearer, and reach washed through me — because the babble of voices was just the same as it had been my very first day here. Marderously angry.

They had to be human voices.

Kyle must be back

Relief warred with pain as I harried into the bright sublight to see what was going on. Relief because my humans were safe. And pain because it Kyle was a ready safely back, then

You're still needed. Wanda So much more than I am

I'm sure I could fina excuses forever, Mel. There will always be some reason.

Then stay.

With you as my prisoner?

We stopped arguing as we assessed the commotion in the cavern

Kyle was back—the easiest one to spot, the takest in the crowd the only one facing me. He was pinned against the far wall by the mob. Though he was the cause of the angry noise, he was not the source of it. His face was conciliatory, pleading. He held his arms out to the sides, palms back, as if there was something behind him he was trying to protect.

"Jest calm down, okaye" His deep voice carned over the cacoph-

ony. "Back oft Jared you're staring her"

A flash of black hair behind is allow an uniamiliar face with wide terrified black eyes, peeked around at the crowd

Jared was closest to Kyle 1 could see that the back of his neck was bright red Jame clung to one of his arms holding him back. In was on his other side his arms crossed in front of him, the muscles in his shoulders tight with strain. Behind them, every other hi man but Doc and Jeb was massed to an angry throng. They surged behind Jared and Jan asking load langry questions.

"What were you thinking?"

"How date you?"

"Why'd you come back at al.?"

Jeb was in the back corner just watching,

Sharons brilliant hair caught my eye. I was surprised to see her with Maggie, right in the center of the crowd. They diboth been so utile a part of life here ever since Doc and I had heated Jamie. Never in the middle of things.

It's the high. Meaguessed. They weren t comfortable us to happiness but they're at home with fury

I thought she was probably right. Flow — disturbing.

I heard a shrill voice throwing out some of the angry questions and realized that Lakey was part of the crowd-too

"Wandar" Kyle's votee carried across the noise again, and I looked up to see his deep blue eyes locked on me. "There you are. Could you prease come and give me a little help here?"

Attached

eb cleared a path for melipushing people aside with his rifle as though lines were sheep and the gun a shepherd's staff.

"That's enough " he growled at those who comp a ned. "You a get a chance to dress im down after. We all will Let's get this sorted out first, okay? Let me through."

From the corner of my eve I saw Sharon and Maggie tal, to the back of the crowd meeting away from the reinstatement of reason. Away from my involvement really more than anything case. Both with raws locked they continued to glare at Kyle

ared and Ian were the last two Job shoved aside I brushed both of

their arms as I passed hoping to be plealm them.

"Okay, Kyle" Job said smarking the barre, of the gun against his pa m "Dont try to excuse yourself, 'couse there aint no excuse I'm plain forn between kickin, valout and shootan' ya new "

The little face, pale under the deep fart of her skin, peeped around Kyle's abow again with a swish of long, cirly black bur. The garl's mouth was hanging open in horror her dark eyes frantic. I thought I could see a faint sheen to those eyes, a hint of silver behind the black.

"But right now, let's calm everyhody down." Jeb turned around, gun held low across his body, and sudden viit was as if he were guarding Kyle and the little face behind him. He glared at the mobilityle's got a guest land you're scaring the snot out of her people. I think you can all dig up some better manners than that Now lad of you clear out and get to work on something useful. My cantaloupes are dying. Somebody do something about that libear?"

He waited until the mattering crowd slowly a spersed. Now that I could see their faces. I could to a that they were a ready getting over it most of them, anyway. This wasn't so had, not after what they a been tearing the last tew days. Yes, Kyie was a self-absorbed id of their taxes seemed to say but at least he was back, no harm done. No evacuation, no danger or the Seekers. No more than usual, anyway. He dibrought another worm back, but then, weren't the caves full of them these days?

It aist wasn't as shocking as it used to be

Many went back toward their interrup ed linch, others returned to the irrigation harre others to their rooms. Soon only Jared Jan, and Jamie were left beside me Jeb looked at these three with a cross expression, his mouth opened but before he could order them away again. Ian took my hand, and then Jamie graubed the other. I felt another hand on my wrist just above Jamie's, Jared

Job rough his eyes at the way they differed hemselves in me to avoid exputsion, and then, urned his back on us

"Thanks, Jeb," Kyle said

"Shut the hell up. Kyle I ist keep your fat mouth shut. I'm dead serious about shorting you worthless magget."

There was a weak wh imper from behind Kyle

"Okay. Jeb But could you save the death threats the were alone? She's remified enough. You remember how that kind of stuff freaks Wanda out." Kile smalled at me. I felt shock cross my face in reaction — and then he turned to the girl hiding behind him with the gen lest expression I diever seen on his face. "See Sunny? This is Wanda the one I told you about She II help us... she won't et anyone hurt you just like me."

The gir. — or was she a woman* She was tiny, but there was a subtle curviness to her shape that suggested more maturity than her size—stated at me her eyes hige with tright. Kyle put his arms around her waist, and she let him put, her into his side. She cling there, as if he were an anchor her pillar of safety.

"Kyle's right." Never thought I I say that. "I won't let anyone hart you Your name is Sunny?" I asked softly

The woman's eyes flashed up to Kyle's Jace

"It's onay You don't have to be afraid of Wanda. She's just I ke you." He turned to me. "Her real name is longer—something about ice."

"Sunlight Passing Through the Ice" she whispered to me

I saw leb's eyes brighten with his unquenchable currosity.

"She doesn't mind being cailed just Sunny, though. She said it was fine," Kyle assured me.

Sunny nodded. Her eyes flickered from my face to Kyie's and back again. The other men were totally a lent and totally motionless. The latic circle of calm soothed her a bit. I could see Sile must have been able to feel the change in the atmosphere. There was no host lity toward her, none at all.

"I was a Bear too. Sunny" I tord her, trying to make her fee, just a little more comfortable. "They called me Lives in the Stars, then. Wanderer, here."

"Lives in the Stars" she whispered, her eyes somehow, impossibly, getting wider, "Rides the Beast."

I suppressed a grean "You lived in the second crystal city, I guess."

"Yes. I heard the story so many times

"Did you like being a Bear, Sunny?" I asked quickly I didn't really want to get into my history right now. "Were you happy there?"

Her face crompled at my questions, her eyes locked onto Kyle's face and filled with tears.

"I'm sorry," I apolog zed at once looking to Kyle too, for an exp a nation.

He patted her arm "Don't be afraid. You won't be burt. I promised."

I could barely hear her answering whisper "But I like a here I want to stay."

Her words brough a thick lamp to my throat

"I know Sunty I know" Kyle put his hand on the back of her head and, in a gesture so tender it made my eyes smart, held her face against his chest

Joh cleared his throat and Sunny started and cringed. It was easy to imagine the frayed state her nerves must be in. Souls were not designed to handle violence and terror.

I remembered king ago when Jared had interrogated meline di asked. I was like other souls. I was not not was the other soul they'd dear with my Seeker Sunity however seemed to embody the essence of my gent elithoid species, we were powerful only in great numbers.

"Norry Name" Jeb said "D' first mean to scare you there. Maybe we ought to get out of here, though," His eyes swept around the cave, where a few people it geted by the exits, gawking at us. He stated hard at Reid and Lucina, and they ducked down the corridor toward the katchen. "Probably ought to git along to Doc." Job continued with a sight, giving the frightened little woman a wistful glance. I guessed he was said to be missing out on new stories.

"Right" Koe said. He kept his arm firmly around bunny's may waist and bulled her with him toward the southern junnel.

I towowed right behind, lowing the others who so I achiered to melleb parised, and we all stopped with him. He jabbed the built of his gun into Jamie's htp.

"Ain't you got school, kid?"

"Aw Unce leb prease? Please? I don't want to miss "

"Get your behind to class."

Jamie turned his hurt eyes on me but leb was absolutely right. This was nothing I wanted lamie to see I shook my head at him.

"Could you get Truey on your way?" Tasked, "Doc needs her"

Jamie's shoulders stamped, and he hulled his hand ont of mine Jared's slip down from my wrist to take its place.

", miss everything" Jamie moaned as he turbed back the other way

"Thanks Job." I whispered when Jamie was out it hearing "Yep."

The song tunnel seemed blacker than before because I could tee the tear radiating from the woman ahead of the "It's okay" Kyle murmured to her "There's nothing that's going to hurt you and I'm here."

I wondered who this strange man was, the one who had come back in Kyie's place. Had they checked his evest I couldn't believe held carried all this gentleness around inside his big angry body.

It must have been having Jod, back, being so close to what he wanted. Even knowing that this was his Jode's body. I was surprised that he could expend so much kindness for the soul matter if I would have thought such compassion was beyond him.

"How's the Healer?" Jared asked me-

"She woke p.) st before I came to find you," I se d.

I heard more than one sign of relief in the darkness.

"She's disoriented, though and very frightened." I warned them at "She can't remember her name. Doe's working with her She's going to be even more scared when at elsees a lof you. I've to be quiet and move slowly, okay?"

"Yes yes." the voices we ispered to the darkness.

"And, Jeb. do you think you could lose the gun? She's a little afra d
of humans still."

"Uh - okay," Jeb answered.

"Afraid of humanse" Kyle marmured.

"We're the bad guys" Ian reminded him, squeezing my hand.

squeezed it back, glad for the warmth of his touch the pressure of his fingers.

How much longer would, have the teeling of a hand warm around miner. When was the last time I would walk down this tunnel? Was it this time?

No. Not yet, Mel whispered.

I was suddenly trembing. Ian's band tightened again and so the Jared's.

We walked an silence for a few moments

"Kyler" Sannys tim I voice asked

"Yes?"

"I don't want to go back to the Bears."

"You don't have to. You can go somewhere else."

"But I can't stay here?"

"No. I'm sorry, Sunny."

There was a little bitch in her breathing I was giad it was ctark. No one could see the tears that started rolling down my face. I had no free hand to wipe them away so I let them fall onto my shirt

We finally reached the end of the tunnel. The sublight streamed from the mouth of the hospital reflecting off the distinctes dancing in the air. I could hear Doc murmining inside.

"That's very good," he was saying. "Keep thinking of details. You know your old address — your name can't be far behind, ehr How Joes this feel? Not tender?"

"Careful," I whispered.

Kyle paused at the edge of the arch, Sunny still canging to his side and motioned for me to go first.

I took a deep breath and walked slowly into Doos place. I an nounced my presence in a low even voice. "Helio."

The Healer's host started and gasped out a little shriek

"Just me again," I said reassuringly

"It's Wanda," Doc remanded her

The woman was sitting up now, and Doc was sitting beside her with his hand on her arm

"That's the soul " the woman whispered anyrously to Doc

"Yes, but she's a friend."

The woman eyed me doubtfully

"Dot? You've got a few more visitors. Is that okave"

Doc looked at the woman. "These are all friends, all right? More of the humans who live here with me. None of them would ever dream of hurting you. Can they come in?"

The woman hesitated, then nodded cautious y "Okay" she whis pered.

"This is Ian" I said, muttoning him forward. "And Jared, and Jeb." One by one, they waked into the moon and stood beside me "And this is Kyle and ... uh, Sunny,"

Does eyes bugged wide as kyle. Sunny attached to his side entered the room.

"Are there any more?" the woman whispered

Dot cleared his throat trying to compose himself. "Yes. There are a lot of people who live here. All well mostly humans," he added, staring at Sunny.

"Trudy is on her way," I told Doc "Maybe Trudy could..." I glanced at Sunny and Kyle." find a room for her to rest in "..."

Doc nodded, still wide-eyed. "That might be a good idea."

"Who's Tri dy?" the women whispered.

"She's very nice. She'll take care of you."

"Is she human, or is she like that one?" She nodded toward me

"She's human."

This seemed to ease the woman's mind

"Oh," Sunny gasped behind me.

I turned to see her staring at the cryotanks that held the Healers. They were standing in the middle of Dou's desk, the lights on top glowing muted red. On the floor in front of the desk, the seven remaining empty tanks were piled in an untidy heap.

Tears sprang to Sunny's eyes again, and si'e buried het face against. Kyle's chest

"I don't want to go' I want to stay with you," she mouned to the bigman she seemed to trust so completely

"I know, Sunny. I'm sorry."

Sunny broke down into sobs

I blinked test triving to keep the tears from my own eyes. I crossed the small space to where Sunny stood, and stroked her springy black hair.

"I need to talk to her for a minute, Kyle," I marmared.

He nodded his face troubled and pulled the tanging gir from his sace

"No, no," she begged.

"It's okay," I promised. "He's not going anywhere I list want to ask you a few questions."

Kyle turned her to tace me, and her arms locked around me I pulled her to the far corner of the room, as far from the nameless woman as I could get I aidn't want our conversarion to confuse or frighten the Healer's host any more than she a ready was. Kyle followed, never more than a few inches away. We sat on the floor facing the wall.

"Jeez," Kyle murmured. "I didn't think it would be like this. This really sucks."

"How did you find her? And catch her?" I asked. The sobbing girl

aidn't react as I questioned him she as kept crying on my shot der. "What happened? Why is she like this?"

"Well I chought she might be in Las Vegas I went there first be fore I went on to Portland See Jod, was really close to her mother and that's where Dons lived. I thought seeing how you were about Jared and the kird, that maybe she would go there even when she wash, odd And I was right. They were all there at the same old house. Dons's house. Dons, and her husband. Warren lithey had other names, but I didn't hear them clearly and Schony I watched them a day, until these her ght me. Sunny was in Jod's old room, alone I snuck in after they diall heen asleep for hours. I vanked Sunny up threw her ever my shoulder, and jumped out the window. I thought she was going to start screaming so I was really booking it back to the teep. Then I was alread because she dian is cart screaming. She was just so quiet. I was afraid she had you know. I ke that guy we caught once."

I winced - I had a more recent memory

"So I pulled her off my shoulder and she was a live just staring up at me, all wide-eved. Still not screaming. I cannot her back to the leep. I'd been planning to tie her up, but it she it did not so kithat i pset. She wasn't trying to get away at least. So I just buckled her in and started driving.

"She ast stared at me for a long time and then finally she said. You're Kide," and I said. Yeah, who are you'r and she told me her name. What is it again?"

"Sumlight Passing Plirough the Ice." Sunny wit spered brokenly. "I like Sunny, though. It's nice."

"Anyway" Kyle went on after clearing his throat. "She didn't mind talking to me at all. She wasn't aftail like I dithought she'd be. So we talked." He was quiet for a moment. "She was happy to see me."

I swallowed loudly.

Kyle reached across me to lay his hand on her cheek

"She's a good kid. Wanda. Can't we send her someplace really micer."

"That's what I wanted to ask her about. Where have volumed Sunny?"

I was vaguely aware of the subdued voices of the others, greeting Ir, dy's arriva. We had our backs to them. I wanted to see what was going on but I was also glad not to have the distraction. I tried to concentrate on the crying soul.

"lust here and with the Bears I was here five lite terms Bt. I like it better here. I haven't had even a quarter of a lite term here."

"I know Beheve me, I an ierstand is there anywhere else though, that you we ever wanted to go? The Flowers, maybe? It's nice there I've been."

"I don't want to be a plant" she mumbled in o my shoulder

"The Spiders "I began but then of my voice trau off. The Spiders were not their ght place for Sunny.

"I'm tired of cold. And I like colors."

"I know " I sighed "I haven't been a Douphin but I hear its nice there. Color, mobility, family . ."

"Di nit you have any other choices?" Kyle asked any ously "Aren't there a lot more places out there?"

I conditional Trucky tacking to the Healer's host, but I tuned out the words. Let the humans take care of their own for the moment.

"Not that the off world ships are going to." I too him, shaking my head. "There are lots at worlds but only a tew mostly the newer ones, are still open for setting. And I'm sorry Sunny but I have to send you far away. The Seckers want to find my friends here, and they didn't go you back if they could so you could show them the way."

"I don't even know the way," she sobbed. My shoulder with derived with her tears, "He covered my eyes."

Ky ellooked at me as if I could product some kind of miracle to miracle to miracle the sall work of tiperfectly. I we the medicine I diprovided some kind of magic. But I knew that I was out or magic, out of happy endings in a for the soil half of the equation, at least

I stared back hopelessly at Ky c. "Lis just the Bears, the Flowers, and the Doiph ins." I role in in. I won't send her to the Fire Planet."

The small woman shill detect at the name

"Don't worry, Sunny You alone the Dolphins They II be nice Of course they II be nice."

She sobbed harder

I sighed and moved on.

"Sunny, I need to ask you about Jod!"

Kyle stiffened beside me.

"What about here" Sunny mambled

"Is she is she in there with you? Can you hear her?"

Sunny smiffed and looked up at me. "I don't understand what you mean."

"Does she ever talk to you? Are you ever aware of her thoughts?"

"My body's? Her thoughter She doesn't have any I'm here now."

I nodded slowly

"Is that bad?" Kyle whispered

"I don't know enough about it to tell It's probabily not good, though."

kyte's eyes tightenect

"Flow long have you been here Sanoy?"

She frowned thinking. "How long is it, Kyle? Five years: Sixe You disappeared before I came home."

"Six," he said.

"And how old are you?" I asked her

"I'm twenty-seven."

That surprised me—she was such a little thing, so young looking. I couldn't believe she was six years older than Melanie.

"Why does that marter?" Kyle asked

"Im not sure. It just seems like the more time someone spent as a human before they became a soul, the bester chance they might have at making a recovery. The greater the percentage of their life they spent human, the more memories they have the more connections the more years being called by the right name. I don't know?"

"Is twenty-one years enough?" he asked, his voice desperate

"I guess we'll find out."

"It's not fair" Sunny wailed "Why do you get to stay? Why can't I stay, if you can?"

I had to swallow hard "That wouldn't be fair wou and But I don't

get to stay Sunny I have to go, too And soon Maybe we'll leave to gether." Perhaps she it be happier if she thought I was going to the Dolphins with her. By the time she knew otherwise, Sunny would have a different host with different emetions and no tie to this human beside me. Maybe Anyway it would be too lare. "I have to go, Sunny, just like you. I have to give my body back too."

And then that and hard from right behind us, Ian's voice broke the quiet like the crack of a whip

"What?"

Welded

an glared down at the three of us with such fury that Sunny shive red in terror. It was an odd thing — as it Kyle and Ian had switched taces. Except Ian's tace was still perfect, unbroken. Beautiful even though it was enraged.

"Ian?" Kyle asked, hew idered, "What's the problem?"

lan spoke from between his locked teeth. "Wanda" he growled, and held his hand out. It looked as if he was having a hard time keeping that hand open not clenching it into a fist.

Uh-oh, Me. thought.

Misery swept through me I didn't want to say goodbye to Ian and now I would have to Of course I had to I would be wrong to sneak out in the taght like a thief and leave all my goodbyes to Melan e

Tan, tired of waiting grabbed my arm and hat led me up from the floor. When Sunny seemed like she was coming along, too, still joined to my side. I in shook me until she tell off.

"What is with your" Kyle demanded

Tan hauled his knee back and smashed his foot hard into Kyle's face.

"Ian!" I protested.

Sunny threw herse to a front of Kyle — who was holding to a hand to his nose and struggling to get to his feet — and tried to shield him with her tiny body. This knocked him off balance, back to the floor, and he groaned.

"Cir on," Ian snarled, dragging me away from them without a backward glance.

"Ian —"

He wrenched me roughly along making it impossible for me to speak. That was fine I had no idea what to say

I saw everyone's startled face flash by in a blur. I was worned he was going to upset the unnamed woman. She wasn't used to anger and violence.

And then we jerked to a stop, Jared was blocking the exit

"Have you jost your nind [an?" he asked shocked and outraged.
"What are you doing to her?"

"Did you know about this?" Ian shouted back, shoving me toward lared and shaking me at him. Behind us, a whimper. He was scanng them

"You're going to hurt hee!"

"Do you know what she's plannings" can roured

Jared stated at Ian. It is face studdenly closed off. He didn't answer

That was answer enough for lan

Jan's fist struck Jared so fast that I missed the blow. I just felt the larch in his body and saw Jared feet back toto the dark has

"Jan. stop," I begged.

"You stop," he growled back at me.

He yanked me through the arch into the tunne then pulled me north. I had to almost run to keep up with his longer strice

"O'Shea!" Jared shouted after us.

"I'm going to hart here" Ian roated back over his shoulder not breaking pace "I am? You typocretcal stome"

There was nothing but silence and plackness behind as now I stumbled in the dark, trying to keep up

It was then that I began to fee, the throbbing from lank grip. His hand was tight as a tourniquet around my apper arm. It is long fingers making the circle easily and then over apping. My hand was going numb.

He jerked me along faster, and my breath caught in a moan, almost a cry of pain.

The sound made lan stumble to a stop. His breathing was hoarse in the darkness.

"Ian Ian I - "I choked unable to finish I didn't know what to say, picturing his furious face

His arms caught me up abruptly vanking my feet out from under me and then carching my shoulders before I could fair. He started running forward again, carrying me new. His hands were not rough and angry like before the cradies me against his chest.

He ran right through the big plaza ignoring the silipprised and even suspicious faces. There was too much that was untamiliar and uncomfortable going on to the caves right now. The humans here Violetta Geolfrey Andy, Palge. Aaron Brandt and more I couldn't see well as we to too past—were ski tish. It disturbed them to see lan running heading through them, face twisted with rage, with me in bia arms.

And then they were behind us. He didn't pause ant; we reached the doors leaning against his and Kyle's room. He kicked the red one out of the way — it hit the stone floor with an echoing boom—and dropped me onto the mattress on the fluor.

lan stood above me, his chest heaving with exertion and him. For a second he turned away and put the door back in place with one swift wrench. And then he was glowering again.

I took a deep breath and rolled up onto my knees, holding my bands out, paims up, wishing that some magic woo diappear in them. Something I could give him isomething I could say. But my hands were empty

"You Are Not Leaving Me." His eyes blazed — burning brighter than I had ever seen them, blue flames.

"lan." I whispered "You have to see that that I can't stay You must see that."

"No!" he shouted at me

I entiged back, and abruptly. Ian crumpled forward falling to his knees, falling into me. He buried his heat, in my stomach, and his arms locked around my waist. He was shaking, shaking hard, and loud, desperate sobs were breaking out of his chest.

"No, lan. no." I begged. This was so much worse than his anger. "Don't, please. Please, don't."

"Wanda," he moaned.

"Lan, please Don't feel this way Don't I'm so sorry Please"

I was crying, too, shaking, too, though that might have been him shaking me.

"You can't leave."

"I have to I have to," I sobbed.

And then we cried wordlessly for a long time

His tears dired before mine. Eventually he straightened up and pulled me into his arms again. He waited until I was able to speak

"Sorry," he whispered. "I was mean."

"No. no I m sorry. I should have told you, when you didn't guess. I just I couldn't I didn't want to tell you — to hart you — to

"We need to talk about this, Wanda It's not a done deal It can't be."

"Tt 18."

He shook his head cienching his teeth "How long? How long have you been planning this?"

"Since the Seeker," I whispered.

He nodded seeming to expect this answer "And you thought that you had to give up your secret to save her I can understand that. But that doesn't mean you have to go anywhere I st because Doc knows now—that doesn't mean anything. It I'd thought for one minute that it did that one action equaled the other I wouldn't have stood there and let you show him. No one is going to force you to be down on his blasted gumpey! I'll break his hands if he tries to touch you!"

"Ian, please."

"They can't make you. Wanda Do you hear mer." He was shouting again.

"No one is making me. I didn't show Doc how to do the separation

so that I could save the Seeker," I whispered. "The Seeker's being here just made me have to decide.... faster. I did it to save Mel. Ian."

His nostrals flared, and he said nothing.

"She's trapped in here. Ian. It's like a prison — worse than that, I can't even describe it. She's like a ghost. And I can free her. I can give her herse floack."

"You deserve a , fe, too Wanua, You deserve to stay"

"But I love her, Ian."

He closed his eyes, and his pale lips went dead white

"But I love you " he whispered "Doesn't that matter?"

"Of course it matters. So much Can't you see? That only makes it more , necessary."

His eyes flashed open "Is it so unbearable to have me love your Is that to I can keep my mouth shut, Wanda I won't say it again. You can be with Jared, if that's what you want Just stay."

"No. Ian "I look his face between my hands—this skin test hard, strained tight over the bones. "No I I love you, too. Me the little silver worm in the back of her head. But my body doesn't love you It can't love you. I can never love you in this body. Ian It put is me in two It's unbearable,"

I could have borne at But watching him stifter because of my body's limitations? Not that

He closed his eyes again. His thick black lashes were wet with tears. I could see them glisten

Oh, youhead, Mel sighed. Do whatever you need to 1 ll step mitthe other room, she added dryly

Thanks

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled myself closer to him until my Lps touched his.

He cur ed his arms around me pulling me tighter against his chest. Our lips moved together fusing as if they would never divide, as if separation was not the nevitable thing it was and I could taste the sail of our tears. His and mine

Something began to change.

When Melanie's body touched Jared's body it was like a wild fire—a fast burn that raced across the surface of the desert and consumed everything in its path.

With a fit was different so very different because Melanic didn't love him the way I d d. So when he touched me it was deeper and slower than the w. aftre like the flow of molten rock far beneath the stifface of the earth. Too deep to feel the heat of it but it moved inexprably, changing the very foundations of the world with its advance.

My unwilling body was a fog between as a thick curtain, but gauzy enough that I could see through it could see what was happening

It changed *me*, not her. It was almost a metallurg call process deep inside the core of who I was, something that had a ready begun, was already nearly forged. But this long, imbroken k as finished it searing and sharp cliged—it shoved this new creation, all hissing, into the cold water that made it hard and final. Unbreakable

And I started to cry again realizing that it must be changing limit too, this man who was kind enough to be a soil but strong as only a human could be

He moved his aps to my even but it was too late. It was done "Don't cry Wanda Don't cry You're staying with me."

"Eight full lives." I whispered against his aw my voice breaking. "Eight his lives and I never found anyone I would stay on a planet fur, anyone I would follow when they left. I never found a partner Why now? Why you? You're not of my species. How can you be my partner?"

"It's a strange inverse" he marm red.

"It's not fair." I complained echoing Suany's words. It wasn't fair. How could I find this, find over—now in this eleventh hour—and have to leave the Wasn't fair that my soul and hody couldn't reconcile? Wasn't fair that I had to love Melan't 100?

Was it tair that Ian would suffer? He deserved happiness if anyone did, It wasn't fair or right or even as with How could I do this to him?

"I love you," I whispered.

"Done say that ske you're saying goodbye."

But I had to "I the soul called Wanderer love you human lan And that with never change no matter what I might become "I worded it carefully so that there would be no lie in my voice. "If I were a Doubtin or a Bear or a Flower at wou do't matter. I would always love you, a ways remember you. You will be my only partner."

His arms stationed, then constructed tighter around me, and I could teel the anger in them again. It was hard to breathe

"You're not wandering off anywhere You're staying here"

"Inn —"

But his voice was brusque now angry but also business, ke "This isn't just for me. You're a part of this community and you aren't getting kicked out without discussion. You are far too important to us as even to the ones who would never admit it. We need you."

"No one's kicking me out, Ian."

"No. Not even you yourse t, Wandeter"

He kissed me again, has mouth rougher with the return of the an ger. His hand cur ed into a fist around my hair, and he pulled my face an inch away from his.

"Good or bad?" he demanded

"Good."

"That's what I thought " And his voice was a growl

He k-ssed me again. His arms were so light around my ribs, his mouth so herce against mine, that I was soon dizzy and gasping for air. He toosened his arms a little then and let his lips shoe to my ear

"Lets go."

"Where? Where are we going?" I wasn't going anywhere. I knew that And yet how my heart pounded when I thought of going away somewhere anywhere with Ian. My Ian. He was mine, the way Jared never would be. The way this body could never be his.

"Don't give me any trouble about this, Wanderer. I'm half out of my mind." He pulled us both to our teet.

"Where?" I insisted.

"You re going down the eastern tunnel, past the field, to the end."

"The game room?"

"Yes. And then you are going to wait there are. I get the rest of them."

"Wity?" His words sounded crazy to me. Did he want to play a game? To ease the tension again?

"Because this Line be discussed. I micalling a tribunal. Wanderer and you are going to abide by our decision."

Completed

t was a small tribunal this ame not like the trial for Kyles , fe. Ian brought only Jeb. Doc and Jared. He knew without having to be fold that Jamie must not be allowed anywhere near these proceedings.

Meanie would have to give that goodbye for me. I couldn't face that, not with Jam e. I didn't care if it was cowardly of me. I wouldn't do it

Just one blue lamp one dim circle of light on the stone floor. We sat on the edge of the ring of light, I was alone, the four men facing me. Jeb had even brought his gun— as if it were a gave, and would make this more official.

The sme. of surfur brought back the painful days of my mourning, there were some memories that I would not regret losing when I was gone.

"How is sheet" I asked Doc urgently as they settled in before they could get started. This tribunal was a waste of my small store of time. I was worned about more important things.

"Which one-" he responded in a weary voice

I stared at him for a few accounts and then my eyes grow wide "Sunny's gone? Aiready?"

"Nyle thought it was cruel to make her siliter longer. She was unhappy."

"I wish a could have said goodbye." I murmured to myself. "And good auck. How is Joai?"

"No response yet,"

"The Heater's body?"

"Trudy took her away. I think they went to get her something to eat. They re working on finding a temporary name she likes, so we can call her something besides the hody." He smowed wryty.

"She the fine I'm sure she wit." I said, trying to be, eve the words "And Jods, too. It will all work out."

No one called me on my lies. They knew I was saying this for myself.

Doc sighed "I cont want to be away from Jodi long. She might need something."

"Right." I agreed "Let's get this over with." The quicker the better Because it didn't matter what was said here. Doc had agreed to my terms. And yet there was some stup dipart of me that hoped—hoped that there was a solution that would make everything perfect and let me stay with Ian and Mel with Jared in a way that absolutely no one would suffer for. Best to crush that impossible hope quickly.

"Okay" Ich said: "Wanda, what's your side-"

"In giving Melanie back." Firm short — no reasons to argue against

"Ian, what's yours?"

"We need Wanda here"

Firm, short he was copying me

Jeb nodded to ...mself. "That's a tricky one. Wanda, way should I agree with you?"

"If it were you you'd want your body back. You can't deny Melanie that."

"Ian?" Jeb asked.

"We have to look at the greater good. Jeb. Wanda's already brought us more hearth and security than we've ever had. She's vital to the

survival of our community of the entire human race. One person can't stand in the way of that."

He's right

Nobody asked you

Jared spoke up. "Wanda what does Mel say?"

Ha; Mel said.

I stared into Jareu's eyes, and the strangest thing happened. All the meeting and meeting I had just been through was shoved aside into the smallest part of my body, the latte corner that I took up physically. The test of me yearned toward Jared with the same desperate, half crazed hunger I difert since the first time I'd seen him here. This body barely belonged to me or to Melanie — a belonged to him.

There really wasn't from chough for the two of us in here

"Me an e wants her body back. She wants her life back."

Liar Tell them the truth

No

"Liar," Ian said. "I can see you arguing with her. I'll bet she agrees with me. She's a good person. She knows how much we need you."

"Mel knows everything I know She II be able to help you. And the Healer's host. She knows more than I ever did. You II be fine. You were fine before I was here. You It survive, rust the before."

Jeb blew out a plat of air frowning "I John know, Wanda Jans got a point"

I g ared at the old man and saw that Jared was doing the same. I looked away from that standoff to level a grim glance at Doc

Doc met my eyes, and his face clenched with pain. He understood the reminder I was giving him. He dipromised. This tribunal culin to overrule that

Ian was watching lared he didn't see our silent exchange.

"Jeh " lared protested. "There's only one decision here. You know that "

"Is there, kide Seems to me there's a whole harrel of lem."

"That's Melante's body "

"And Wandas, too."

lab leaned forward into the light in siface suddenly furious again.

"And what is it that you're doing to Wanda Jared? And the rest of us, if you take her away?"

"You don't care about the rest of anybody! You just wint to keep. Wanda at Mc ame's expense — nothing cise matters to you."

"And you want to have Me arise at Wandas expense—nothing cise matters to *you*? So, with those things being equal at comes down to whats best for everyone else."

"No! It comes down to what Melanie wants. That's her body."

They were both crouched halfway between string and standing now their fists clenched and their faces twisted with rage

"Coo. t. boys. Cool t right now." Jeb ordered. "This is a tribuna... and we're going to stay calm and keep our heads. We've got to think about every side."

"Jeb - " Jared began

"Shat up." Jeb chewed on his lip for a white "Okay, here's how I see it. Wanda's right —"

Ian lurched to his feet.

"Hold it Sit yourse t back down. Let me fin sh."

Jeb waited until Ian, the tendons standing out in his taut neck, stiffly returned to a seated position

"Wanda is right," Jeb said. "Mel needs her body back. But" he added quickly when lan tensed again, "but I don't agree with the rest, Wanda I think we need you pretty bad, kid. We got Seekers out there lookin for us, and you can talk right to em. The rest of us can't do that You save lives. I got to think about the welfare of my household."

Jared spoke through his teeth. "So we get her another body. Obviously."

Due s crumpied face litted Jeb's white catery, lar evebrows touched his hairline. Ian's eyes undened and his lips pursed. He stared at me, considering. . . .

"No No "I shook my head frantically

"Why not Wandar" Jeb asked "Don't sound like a half bad idea to me."

I swanowed and took a deep breath so my voice wouldn't turn hysterical "leb Listen to me carefully, leb I am tired of being a parasite. Can you't inderstand that? Do you think I want to go into another body and have this start all over again? Do I have to teel guilty forever tor taking someone's life away from them? Do I have to have someone else hate me? I'm bare y a soul anymore — I love you brutish humans too much. It's wrong for me to be here, and I bute feeling that."

I took another breath and spoke through the tears that were falling now. "And what if things change? What if you put me in someone else, steal another life, and it goes wrong? What if that body pulls me after some other love, back to the souls? What if you can't trust me anymore? What if I betray you next time? I don't want to hart you."

The first part was the pure and unadorned truth, but I was lying wild y through the second. I hoped they wouldn't hear that It would help that the words were barely coherent, my reass turned to sobs. I would never burt them. What had happened to me here was permanent, a part of the very atoms that made up my small body. But maybe if I gave them a reason to fear me, they would more easily accept what had to be

And my hes worked for once I caught the worned grance Jared and Job exchanged. They hadn't thought of that — of my becoming untrustworthy becoming a danger, Ian was already moving to put his arms around me. He dried my tears against his chest.

"It's okay honey You don't have to be anyone else. Nothing's going to change."

"Hold on, Wanda." Jeb said, his shrewd eyes suddenly sharper "How does going to one of those other planets help your You' still be a parasite, kid."

lan flinched around me at the harsh work.

And I flinched also, because Jeb was too insightful, as always,

They waited for my answer all but Doc, who knew what the real answer was. The one I wouldn't give

I tried to say only true things "It's different on other planets, Jeb There isn't any resistance. And the hosts themselves are different. They aren't as ind victualized as humans, their emotions are so much milder. It doesn't tee, like stealing a life. Not like it feels here. No one will hate me. And I'd be too far away to hurt you. You'd be safer. "

The last part sounded too much like the he it was, so I let my voice trail off

Jeb stared at me through narrowed eyes, and I looked away.

I tried not to rook at Doc but I couldn't help time brief grance, to make sure he understood. His eves locked on mine thear a miserable, and I knew that he did.

As I quickly lowered my gaze. I caught Jared staring at Doc. Had be seen the silent communication?

Jeb signed, "This is — a pickle." His face turned into a grimace as he concentrated on the dilemma.

"Jeb =" Ian and Jared said together. They both stopped and scowled at each other."

This was all just a waste of time, and I had only hours. Just a tew more hours. I knew that for certain now

"Jeb," I said softly my voice barely aucuble over the spring's gushing murmar and everyone turned to me. "You don't have to decide right now. Doc needs to theck on Jod, and I d like to see her too. Plus, I haven't eaten all day. Why con't you sleep on it? We can talk again tomorrow. We've got plenty of time to think about this."

Lies. Could they tell?

"That's a good idea, Wanda I think everyone here could use a breather Go get some food and we all sleep on it."

I was very cateful not to look at Doc now, even when I spoke to him.

"I li be along to help with Jodi after I est. Doc. bee you later."
"Okay," Doc said wardy

Why couldn't he keep his tone casual? He was a human he should have been a good har

"Hungry" Ian marmared, and I nodded I or him help me up. He latched on to my hand, and I knew he would be keeping a right hold on me now. That didn't worry me. He siep, deep y, like Jamie.

As we walked from the dark room. I could fee, eyes on my back but I wasn't sure whose.

Just a few more things to do. Three, to be precise. Three, ast decus to be completed.

First, I ate.

It wouldn't be nice to leave Mel with her body uncomfortable from hunger. Besides, the tood was better since I dibeen raiding. Something to look forward to rather than endure.

I made Ian get the food and bring it to me while I hid in the field where half grown spreads of wheat replaced the corn. I told Ian the truth so that he would help me. I was avoiding Jamie. I didn't want Jamie frightened by this decision. It would be harder for him than for lared or Ian. I they each fook one side. Jamie, oved as both, he would be more evenly torn.

Ian did not argue with me. We are in shence, his arming it around my waist.

Second, I went to see Sunny and Iod.

I expected to see three glowing cryotanks on top of Doc's desk, and I was surprised that there were still just the two Healers, set in the center. Doc and kyte hovered over the cor where Indi lay ment. I walked quickly to them, about to demand to know where Sunny was but when I got closer, I saw that kyle had an occupied cryotank cradled in one arm.

"You II want to be gent e with hat," I murmared

Doc was roughing Jode's wrist, counting to himself. His ips pressed into a thin the when he heard my voice, and he had to begin over again.

"Year. Doc rold me that" Kyie said, his gaze never leaving Jodi's tace. A dark, matched set of bruises was forming under his eyes. Was his nose broken again? "I'm being careful I just didn't want to leave her a one over there. She was so said and so sweet."

"I'm sure she diappreciate it if she knew."

He nodded, still staring at Jodi. "Is there something I m supposed to be doing here? Is there some way to help?"

Talk to her say her name, to k about things she ll remember. Talk about Sunny even. That helped with the Healer's host?

"Mandy." Doc corrected "She says it's not exactly right but it's close"

"Mandy." I repeated Not that I would need to remember "Where is she?"

"With Trudy that was a good call there. Trudy's exactly the right person. I think sho's gotten her lo sleep."

"That's good Mandy will be okay"

"I hope so." Doc sinked but it dian affect his gloomy expression much. "I ve got lots of questions for her."

I looked at the small woman — it was still impossible to believe that she was older than the body I wore. Her face was slack and valent. It frightened me a little — she I been so vibrantly alive when Sunny was inside. Would Mel . . ?

I'm still bere

I know. You'll be fine

Like Lacev She winced and so did I

Never like Lucev

I touched lodi's arm softly She was much like Lacey in some ways. Olive skinned and black haired and tiny. They could almost be sisters, except that lod a sweet, wan face could never look at repelient.

Kyle was tongue-tied, holding her hand

"Like this. Kyle." I said. I brushed her arm again "Jodi? Jodi, can you hear her kyle's waiting for you. Jodi. He got himself in a lot of trouble getting you here—everybody who knows him wants to beat him senseless." I grinned wryly at the tilg man, and his lips curied up at the corners, though he didn't look up to see my smile.

"No, that you resurprised to hear that." Ian said beside me. "When hasn't that been the case, eh. Jour lit's good to see you again, sweet heart. Though I wonder if you teel the same way. Must have been a nice break to get rid of this id of for so long."

Kyle hadn't noticed his brother was there, attached like a vise to my hand, until Jan spoke.

"You remember Ian of course. Never has managed to catch up to me in anything, but he keeps trying. Hey Ian." Kyle added, never moving his eyes. "you got abything you want to say to me?"

"Not really."

"I'm waiting for an apology."

"Keep waiting."

"Can you believe he kicked me in the face Jodes? For no reason at all."

"Who needs an excuse, eh, Jodi?"

It was oddly pleasant, the banter between the brothers, Jod's presence kept it—ght and teasing. Gentle and tunny I would have woken up for this. It I were her, I would have been smilling already.

"Keep it up. Kyle" I marmared "That's just right. She'll come around."

I wished I would get to meet her to see what she was like I could only picture Sunny's expressions.

What would it be like for everyone here incetting Melanic for the first time? Would it seem the same to them as if there were no differ ence? Would they really grasp that I was gone for would Melanie simply fill the role I had?

Maybe they would find her entirely different. Maybe they would have to adjust to her all over again. Maybe she would fit in the way I never had. I pictured her which was picturing me, the center of a crowd of friendly faces. Pictured us with Freedom in our arms and all the humans who had never trusted me snilling with welcome.

Why did that bring tears to my eyes? Was I really so petty?

No. Mel assured me And they lemiss you - of course they and Alt the best people here will feet your loss

She seemed to finally accept my decision

Not accept she casagreed. I just can't see any way to stop you. And I can feel how close it is I'm seared, too Isn't that funny? I'm absolutely terrified

That makes two of us.

"Wanda?" Kyle said.

"Yes?"

"I'm softy."

"Um ... whyr"

"For trying to kill you." he said casual v. "Guess I was wrong."

Ian gasped "Please tell me you have some kind of recording device available, Doc."

"Nope. Sorry, Ian."

Ian shook his head. "This moment should be preserved. I never thought I'd live to see the day that Kyie O'Shea would admit to being wrong. C'mon, Jodi. That ought to shock you awake."

"Jods, baby don't you want to defend mer Tell Ian I never have been wrong before" He abackled.

That was nice. It was race to know that I'd earned Kyie's acceptance before I left. I hadn't expected that much There was no more I could do here. There was no point in linger and lods would either come back or she would not but neither out come would change my path now.

So I proceeded to my thire and final deed. I led

I stepped away from the corlidox a deep bream and stretched my arms.

"I'm tired, Ian," I sa.d

Was at really a less it undnot sound so faise. It had been a long long day, this my last day I dibeen up all night, I real zed. I hadn't slept since that last raid. I must have been exhausted.

fan noc ded. "I bet you are Did you stay i p with the Heal — with Mandy all night?"

"Yeah." I yawned.

"Have a nice night. Due." Ian said, putting me it ward the exit. "Good luck. Kyle. We II be back in the morning."

"Night Kyle" I murmured "See you Doc"

Doc glowered at me that land back was to him and Kyle was staring at loci. I returned Doc's glare with a scenary gaze.

lab walked with mell-brough the black tunner saving nuthing. I was guid he wasn't in the mood for conversation. I wouldn't have been able to concentrate on it. My stimuch was twisting and turning wringing itself into strange contortions.

I was done at my tasks accomplished I only had a wait a bit now and not fall asleep. I fired as I was I did not think that would be a problem. My heart was pounding like a fist having my ribs from the inside

No more stalling. It had to be tonight and Mel knew that too What had happened today with Ian had shown me that The inger I stayed the more tears and arguments and fights I would cause. The better the chance that I or someone else would slip up and Jamie would find out he truth. Let Mel expia in traffer the fact. It would be better that way.

I basks to reach. Me thought her words dewed tast in a hirst her fear marring her sarcasm.

Sorry. You don't mind too much?

She sighed. How can I minut I'd do unything you asked me iii. Wanda

Take care of them for me

I would have done that anywey

Ian, too

I he have me the got a foreign no magnitude the so with be Even if he won't let you

La des rebutes et Lean for him. Wanda a promise

In a paused in the half ourside the red and gray doors to his room. He raised his evebrows, and I not ded. Let him think I was still hid ng from Jamie. That was true, too.

fan slid the real door aside, and I went straight to the mattress on the right. I halled up there, knotting my shaking hands in front of my hammering heart, trying to hide them behink in y knees.

lan curred around me holding he close to his chest. This would have been fine. I knew that he would end up sprawled out in an directions when he was real asleep except that he could feel my trembling.

"It's going to be fine Wanda I know well, find a solution."

"I truly love you Ian." It was the only way I could tell him good by: If earny way he would accept I knew he would remember later and understand. "With my write e soul. Hove you."

"I trusy love you, too, my Wanderer"

He mazzled is tace against mine until he found my lips, then he kissed me slow and gent either flow of nolten rock sweding languadly in the dark at the renter of the parth, until my showing slowed.

"Sleep Wanda Save a for this brow. It will keep for the fight."

I nodded moving my face against his land sighed

Ian was tired too I didn't have to wait long I stated at the redig. I the stars had mixed above the cracks here. I could see three of them in whiterenet we there had been only two. I watched them wink and pulse across the brackness of space. They did not call to me. I had no desire to join them.

One at a time. Fans arms to laway from me. He flopped onto his back in uttering in his sleep. I didn. Gare wait any longer. I wanted too badly to slay it, fair as eep with lim and steal one more day.

I moved calair as y bit he was in to danger of waking. His breathing was heavy and even. He wou unit open his eves till morning

I proshed his smooth for chead with my lips, then rose and slid out the door.

588 STEPHEN E MEYER

It was not ate, and the caves were not empty. I could hear voices bouncing around, strange echoes that might have been coming from anywhere. I didn't see anyone until I was in the big cave. Geoffrey, Heath, and Lily were on their way back from the kitchen. I kept my eyes down, though I was very glad to see Lily. In the brief glimpse I allowed myself. I could see that she was at least standing upright, her shoulders straight. Lily was tough. Like Me. She dimake it too.

I harried to the southern corridor relieved when I was safe in the brackness there. Received and horrifical It was really over now

I'm so afraid, I whimpered

Before Mel could respond a heavy band cropped on my shoulder from the darkness.

"Going somewhere?"

Finished

was so tightly wound that I shricked in terror. I was so terr fied that my shrick was only a breathless little squeal.

"Sorry " Jared's arm went around my shoulders, comforting, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, still breathless.

"Following you. I ve been following you all night."

"Well, stop it now."

There was a besitation in the dark, and his arm didn't move I shrugged out from under it, but he caught my wrist. His grip was firm I wouldn't be able to shake free cashy.

"You're going to see Doce" he asked, and there was no confusion in the question. It was obvious that he wasn't talking about a social visit.

"Of course I am " I hissed the words so that he wouldn't hear the panic in my voice. "What else can I do after today? It shot going to get any better. And this, and feb's decision to make."

"I know I'm on your sade"

It made me angry that these words still had the power to hart me to bring tears still girls into my eyes. I tried to hold on to the chought of lan — he was the anchor as Kyle somehow had been for Sunny but it was hard with lared's hand touch it gime with the smell of him in my lose. If ke trying to make out the song of the violin when the entire percussion section was bashing away.

"Then let me go. Jared. Go away I want to be alone." The words came out herce and tast and lattle. It was easy to hear that they weren't lies.

"I should come with you,"

"You'll have Me ame back soon enough," I snapped "I'm only ask tog for a few minutes. Jared. Give me that much "

Another pause, his hand diunit loosen

"Wanda I would come to be with you."

The tears spilled over I was grateful for the darkness

"It wouldn't tee that way " I wh spered "So there's to point"

Of course Jared coil d not be a lowed to be there. Only Dor could be trusted. Only he had promised me. And I wasn't leaving this planet. I wasn't going to go the as a Dolphin or a Flower a ways grieving for the loves I dieft behind me. a dead by the time I opened my eyes again if I even had eyes. This was my planet, and they wouldn't make me leave. I would stay in the dire in the dark grotto with my friends. A himan grave or the jumps I had become.

"But Wanda, 1 There's so much that I need to say to you."

"I don't want your gratifude, Jared. Trust me on that "

"What an you wall the the whispered, his you e strained and choked. "I would give you anything"

"Take care of my fam, v. Don't let the others toll them."

"Of course I'll take care of them." He dismissed my regrest brusque v. "I meant you. What can I give you?"

"I can't take anything with me. Jared."

"Not even a memory. Wandar What do you want?"

thrushed the tears away with my free hand, but others took their place too quickly for it to reatter. No. I am idnit, ake even a memory

"What car I give you, Wandar" he insisted

I rook a deep breath and tried to keep my voice steady

"Cive me a lic. Jared. Tell me you want me to stay."

There was no hest at on this time. His arms wound around me in the dark held me securely against his chest. He pressed his tostagainst my torelieau, and I telt his breath move my hair when he spoke

Melanie was howing her breath in my lead. She was trying to bury herse flagain trying to give me will freedom for these fast minutes. Maybe she was afraid to beten to these lies. She wouldn't want this memory when I was gone.

"Stay here Wanda With as. With we I don't want you to go. Please I can't imagine having you gone I can't see that I don't know how to ... how to ... " His voice broke.

He was a very good far. And he must have been very, very sure of me to say those things.

I rested against him for a moment but I could feel the time pulling me away. Time was up. Time was up.

"Thank you." I whispered and I tried to extricate myself

His arms tightened. "I'm not done."

Our faces were only inches apart. He closed the distance, and even here on the edge of my ast breath on this planet. I couldn't belo responding Crasos ne and an open flame. - we exploded again.

It wasn't the same, though I could feel that I his was for me. It was my name that he gasped when he held this book — and he thought of it as my body, thought of it as me. I could feel the difference. For one moment, it was just us, just Wanderer and large, both of as barriing

No one had ever hed better than Jared and with his body in my last minutes and or that I was grateful. I couldn't take it with meliberause. I wash a going anywhere but it eased some of the pain of leaving a could be leve the lie. I could beseve that he would miss me so much that it might even mar some of his roy. I shouldn't want that but it feit good to believe it anyway.

I couldn't ignore the time, the seconds ticking like a countdown Even on fire, I could be them dragging at me sucking me down the cark consider Taking me away from a this heat and feeling.

I managed to pull my ups away from his. We panted in the wark, our breath warm on each other's lices

"Thank you," I said again

"Wait ."

"Lang Leant bear any more Okay?"

"Okay," he whispered.

"I just want one more thing. Let me do this alone Please?"

"If if you're sure that's what you want. " He trailed off, unsure.

"It's what I need, Jared "

"Then I'll stay here," he said hoarsely

"I'll send Doc to get you when it's over"

His arms were still locked around me.

"You know that Ian is going to try to kill me for letting you do this? Maybe I should let him. And Jamie. He is never torgive either of us."

"I can't think about them right now Please Let me go."

Slowly with a palpable rejuctance that warmed some of the cold emptiness in the center of my body. Jared let his arms slide away.

"I love you, Wanda."

I sighed "Thanks, Jared You know how much I love you. With my whole heart"

Heart and soul. Not the same thing in my case I d been divided too long. It was time to make something whose again, make a whole person. Even if that excluded me.

The ticking seconds pulled me toward the end. It was cold when he no longer held me. It got colder every step I took away from him.

Just my imagination, of course. It was still summer here, it would always be summer here for me.

"What happens here when it rains, Jared?" I whispered. "Where do people sleep?"

It took ham a moment to answer and I could hear tears in his voice "We" "He swammed "We all move into the game room Everyone sleeps in there together."

I hooded to myself. I wondered what the atmosphere would be like. Awkward, with all the conflicting personalities? Or was it fun? A change? Like a alumber party?

"Why?" he whispered

"I just wanted to imagine. How it will be." Life and love would go on. Even that ghild would happen without me, the idea brought me joy. "Goodbye Jared. Mel says she likee you soon."

Ligr

"Wait Wanda "

I hurried down the lunner harried away from any chance that he might, with his grateful i es convince me not to go. There was only silence behind me

His pain and not hurt me the way fan's had. For Jared pain would be over soon. Joy was only minutes away. The happy ending

The southern tunnel felt only a few yards long. I could see the bright lantern butning ahead, and I knew Doc was waiting for me

I walked into the room that had always frightened me with my shoulders squared. Dot had everything prepared. In the commest conner, I could see two cots pushed together. Kyle snoring with his arm around Jodi's motionless form. His other arm was still curied around. Sonny's tank. She would have liked that I wished there was some way to tell her.

"Hey, Doc." I whispered.

He looked up from the table where he was setting out the medicine. There were already tears streaming down his face.

And suddenly I was brave. My heart slowed to an even pace. My breath deepened and relaxed. The hardest parts were over

I had done this before. Many times, I had closed my eyes and gone away. Always knowing new eyes would open again, but still. This was familiar. Nothing to fear.

I went to the cor and hopped up so that I was sitting on it. I reached for the No Pain with steady hands and screwed the . d off. I put the little tissue square on my tongue, let it assoive.

There was no change I wasn't in any pain this time. No physical pain.

"Tell me something. Doc. What's your real name?"

I wanted to answer all the little puzzles before the end.

Doc spifted and wiped the back of his hand under his eyes.

"Eustace It's a family name and my parents were crue people"

I laughed once. Then I sighed "lared's waiting, back by the big cave. I promised him you'd tell him when it was over. Just wait until I april I stop moving, okay? It will be loo late for him to do anything about my decision then."

"I don't want to do this, Wanda."

"I know Thanks for that. Doe But I'm holding you to your promise."

"Please?"

"No. You gave me your word. I do my part, d dot I-"

"You did."

"Then do yours. Let me stay with Walt and Wes."

Fl.s thin face worked as he tried to keep back a sob-

"Will you be . . , in pain?"

"No Doc," I lied. "I won't feel anything."

I waited for the euphoria to come, for the No Pain to set everything glowing the way it had the last time. I still didn't feel any difference

It must not have been the No Pain after a.. It had I ist been being loved. I sighed again.

I stretched out on the cot, on my stomach, and turned my face toward him.

"Put me under, Doc."

The bottle opened. I heard bim shake it onto the caoth in his hand.

"You are the noniest, purest creature I've ever met. The universe will be a darker place without you," he whispered

These were his words over my grave, my epitaph, and I was glad that I got to hear them.

Thouk you Wanda My sister I will never torget you

Be bappy Mel Emoy it all Appreciate a for me

I will, she promised

Bye, we thought together.

Does hand pressed the rioth gent y over my face. I breathed in deeply agnoring the thack, ancomfortable scent. As I took another breath, I saw the three stars again. They were not calling to me, they were letting me go, leaving me to the black universe I bad wandered for so many met mes. I drifted into the black and it got brighter and brighter. It wasn't black at all — I was how Warm is brant, brilliant black. I floated into it with no tear at all.









Remembered

he beginning would feel like the end. I dibect warned

But this time the end was a greater surprise than it had ever
been. Greater than any end I'd remembered in ninc lives. Greater
than printing down in elevator shaft. I had expected no more memoties, no more aboughts. What end was this?

The sun is setting—the colors are all rosy and they make me think of my triend—what would her name be here? Something about—ruttles? Ruffles and more rittles. She was a beaut full Flower. The flowers here are so ifeless and boring. They smell wonderful though. Smells are the best part of this place.

Footsteps behind mel Has Cloud Spinner followed melagain? I don't need a jacket litis warm here i finally! – and liwant to fee the air on my skin won't look at her Maybeishell think ican't hear and she'll go home. She is so caret, with melibut im almost grown now. She can't mother meliorever

"Excuse me" sameone says, and idon't know the voice.
I turn to look at her and idon't know the lace either She's preffy.

BOO STEPHEN E MEYER

The face in the memory jerked me back to myself. That was my face. But I didn't remember this.

"Hi," I say

"Hello My name is Meianie." She smiles at me. "tim new in town and think I'm lost."

"Oh, Where are you rrying to go? If take you. Our car is just back..."

"No. it's not far lives going for a walk but now can't find my way back to Becker Street."

She's a new neighbor - how nice I love new friends

"You're very close," I tell her "I is just around the second corner up that way, but you can cut right through this little alley here. It takes you straight there."

"Could you show mer im sorry, what's your name?"

"Of course. Come with me. in Pelals Open to the Moon, but my family mostly calls me. Per. Where are you from, Melanie?"

She laughs "Do you mean San Diego or the Singing World, Pet?"

"Ether one" I laugh, too. Tike her smile "There are two Bats on this street. They live in that yellow house with the pine trees."

"Ill have to say hello," she murmurs, but her voice has changed, tensed She's looking mo the dusky alley as though she's expecting to see something.

And there is something there. Two people, a man and a boy. The boy drags his hand through his long black hair like he's hervous. Maybe he is worried because he's fost, too. His preffy eyes are wide and excited. The man is very still.

Jamie Jared My heart thumped, but the fee ing was peculiar wrong. Too small and . . fluttery.

"These are my friends. Pet." Meianie relis me

"Oh Oh, helio." I stretch my hand out to the man he's the closest. He reaches for my hand, and his grip is so strong.

He yanks me forward right up to his body don't understand. This feels wrong, I don't like it

My heart bears faster, and I'm afraid. I've never been scared like this before I don't understand

His hand swings toward my face, and ligaspill suck in the mist that comes from his hand. A silver cloud that tastes like raspberries.

"Wha " want to ask, but can't see them anymore. can't see anything...

There was no more.

"Wanda- Can you hear me Wanda-" a fam har youte asked.

That wasn't the right name—was it? My ears didn't react to it, but something did. Wasn't I Petals Open to the Moon? Pet? Was that it? That didn't feel right, either My heart beat faster, an echo of the fear in my memory. A vision of a woman with white-and red streaked hair and kind green eyes filled my head. Where was my mother? But—she wasn't my mother was she?

A sound a low voice that echoud around me. "Wanda Come back We gren't letting you go."

The voice was familiar and it was also not It sounded like me? Where was Petals Open to the Moon? I couldn't find her Just a thousand empty memories. A house full of pictures but no inhabitants.

"Use the Awake," a voice said. I didn't recognize this one.

Something brushed my face—ght as the touch of for 1 knew that scent. It was the smell of grapetrum

I took a deeper breath, and my mind suddenly deares.

I could teel that I was lying down — but this felt wrong, too. There wasn't — enough of me. I felt shrunken

My hands were warmer than the rest of me, and that was because they were being held. Held in big hands, hands that swa lowed them right up.

It smelled had stuffly and a little moldy. I remembered the smell but surety I dinever smelled it before in my life.

I saw nothing but duli red — the insides of my evelids. I wanted to open them so I went searching for the right muscles to do that

"Wanderers Wore an waiting for you honey Open your eyes."

This voice, this warm breath against my car was even more familiar. A strange feeling tickled through my veins at the sound. A feeling I'd never lever feat before. The sound made my breath catch and my fingers tremble.

I wanted to see the face that went with that voice

A cotor washed through my mind — a color that called to me from a faraway to a brill anti-glowing blue. The whole powerse was bright blue. . . .

And finally I knew my name. Yes, that was right. Wanderer, I was Wanderer, Wanda, too, I remembered that now.

A light touch on my face — a warm pressure on my lips, on my eve ids. Ah, that's where they were I could make them hink now that I'd found them.

"She's waking up?" someone crowed excitedly.

famile Jamile was here. My beart gave another fluttery little thump.

It took a moment for my eyes to tocus. The base that stabbed my eyes was an wrong — too pale, too washed out. It wasn't the base I wanted.

A hand touched my face "Wanderer?"

I looked to the sound. The movement of my head on my neck for so odd. It didn't feel like it used to but at the same time it felt the way it had always felt.

My searching eyes found the blue I'd been looking for Sapphire snow, and midnight

"lane lan where am le". The sound of the voice coming out of my throat frightened me. So high and trilling. Familiar but not mine. "Who am Le".

"You're you." Ian told me. "And you're right where you belong."

I pulled one of my hands free from the giant's hand that held it. I mean, to touch my face, but someone's hand reached toward me, and I froze.

The reaching hand also troze above me

I tried to move my hand again to protect myself, but that moved the hand above me. I started spaking, and the hand trembled

Oh.

I opened and crosed the hand rooking at it carefully

Was this my hand this tiny things It was a choos band except for the long pink and white nails, filed into perfect, smooth curves. The skin was fair with a strange silvery east to it and, entirely incongruous, a scattering of golden freekles. It was the odd combination of silver and gold that brought the image back. I could see a face in my head, reflected to a mirror

The setting of the memory threw me of, for a momen, because I wasn't used to so much civilization—a, the same time. I knew nothing but civilization. A pretty dresser with all kinds of fully and delicate things on top of it. A profusion of dainty glass bott es containing the scents I loved.—I loved? Or she loved? — so much. A potted or chid. A set of silver combs.

The tilg round mirror was trained in a wreath of metal roses. The face in the mirror was roundish too, for quite oval Small. The skin on the face had the same sliver undertone. — silver like moonlight as the hand, did, with another handful of the golden freekles across the bridge of the nose. Wide gray eyes, the silver of the soul shimmering faintly behind the soft color framed by tangled golden lashes. Pare pink lips, full and almost round, like a baby s. Small, even white teeth behind them. A dimple in the chin. And everywhere, everywhere, golden waving hair that stood away from my face in a bright halo and fell below where the mirror showed.

My face or her facer

It was the perfect face for a Night Flower. Like an exact translation from Flower to human

"Where is she?" my high reedy voice demanded "Where is Per?". Her absonce trightened me. I'd never seen a more defenseless creature than this half-child with her moon, ght face and sunlight hair.

"She's right here." Doc assured me. "Tanked and ready to go. We thought you could teal as the best place to send her."

I looked toward his voice. When I saw him standing in the sunlight is in cryotans in his hands a rush of memories from my former life came back to me.

"Doc" I gasped in the tiny tragile voice "Doc you promised You gave me your bath I aware Willy Why did you break your worde"

A dim reconcert on of misery and pain fouched me. This body had never felt such agony before. It shield away from the string

Even an honest man scimetimes caves to curess. Wanca."

"Duress," another terribly fam ar voice scotted

I disay a knife to the throat counts as Guress Jared "

"You knew I wouldn't really use at "

"That I die not. You were quite persuasive."

"A knife?" My body trembled.

"Shin it's a okay," Ian marmured. His breath blew strands of golden hair across my face, and I br., shed them away—a routine gesture. "Did you really think you could leave us that way." Wanda. "He sighed, but the sigh was joyful.

lan was happy. This insight made my worry suddenly much lighter, easier to bear.

"I told you I didn't want to be a parasite," I whispered

"Let me through," my o'd voice ordered. And then I could see my face the strong one with the sun-brown skin, the strought black line of the evebrows over the almond shaped hazel eyes, the high sharp cheekbones. See it backward not as a reflection, the way I'd always seen it before

"Listen up. Wanda. I know exact y what you don't want to be But we're human, and we're seitish and we don't a ways oo the right thing. We aren't going to let you go. Deal with it."

The way she spoke the cadence and the tone, not the voice brought back all the stient conversations, the voice in my head, my sister

"Mel? Mel, you're okay!"

She smiled then and leaned over to hag my shoulders. She was bigger than I remembered being.

"Or course I am Wash t that the point of an the drama? And you're going to be fine, too We weren't stupid about it. We didn't just grab the first body we saw."

"Let me it her, let me?" Jamie shoved to beside Me. It was get ting very crowded around the cot it rocked instable.

I took his hand and squeezed it. My hands felt so teebie. Could he even feel the pressure?

"Jamiel"

"Hey, Wandal This is cook and it? You're smaller than me now." He grinned, triumphant

"But stronder 1 m almost — " And then I stopped, changing my sentence abruptly "My birthusy is in two weeks."

I might have been disoriented and confused but I wasn't stupid

Melanie's experiences had not gone to waste. I had learned from them. Ian was every bit as honorable as fared, and I was not going to go through the frustration Me an e had.

So I ned giving myself an extra year "I II be eighteen"

From the corner of my eye. I saw Melante and Ian stitten in surprise. This body weiked much younger than her true age, hovering on the edge of seventeen.

It was this little deception, this preemptive clauming of my partner that made me realize I was staying here. That I would be with Ian and the rest of my family. My throat thickened, telt odd v swoten

Jamie patted my face calling my attention back. I was surprised at how big his hand telt on my cheek. "They let me come on the raid to get you."

"I know "I muttered "I remember Well Per remembers see

ng you there " I glared at Mel who shrugged

"We tried not to scare her," Jamie said. "She's so kind of frag tle looking, you know . An I'm ce too. We picked her out together, but I got to decide. See Me, said we had to get someone young. one who had a bigger percentage of te as a soul or something. But not too young because she knew you wouldn't want to be a chaid. And then lared ked this face because he said to one could ever disdistruct it You don't look dangerous at all You look the opposite of dangeror s. Jared said anyone wild sees you would just na urally want to protect you, right lared? But then I got the final say because I was looking ter someone who looked a ke was And I thought this looked like you. Because she sort of noks I ke an ange, and you're good ake that And real pretty I knew you would be pret v." Jamie smued hage v. "Ian dian't come. He just say here with you — he said he didn't care what you looked ke life wo., In tilet anyone else put a finger on your tank at a. not even me or Me. But Doc let me watch this time I, was way coo. Wanda I don't know why you wouldn't let me watch bet me. They wou and let me help though Ian wou an't let anvone touch you but him."

Ian squeezed my hand and leaned in to wh sper through all the hair. His voice was so low that I was the on vione who could hear. "I

head you in my hand. Wanderer And you were so beautau."

My eyes got as wer and I had to snith

"You like it, don't you?" Jamie asked, his voice worned now "You'te not mad? There's nobody in there with your's there?"

"I'm not mad exact..." I whispered "And I I can't find anybody else Just Pet's memories. Pet's been in here since — I can't remember when she wasn't here. I can't remember any other name."

"You're not a paras, e." Melarie said firm vitouching my hair puting up a strand and letting the gold slide between her fingers. "This body d'unit belong to Pet but there's nobody e se to claim it. We waited to make sure. Wanda. We tried to wake her up at nost as long as we tried with Jodi."

"Jode" What happened to Jode" I chirped my latte voice going higher, ke a bird's, with anxiety I struggled olget up and lan pulled me at took no effort no strength to move my tany new body and a sitting position with his arm supporting me. I could see all the faces then.

Doe no more tears in his eyes. Jeb peeking around Doe his expression satisfied and burning with cumosity at the same time. Next, a woman I didn't recognize for a second because her face was more and mared than I'd ever seen it, and I badn't seen it much a nyway—Mandy, the former Healer Closer to me, famile with his bright excited smile. Melanie beside him, and fared behind her his hands around her waist I knew that his han is would never teel right unless they were touching her body—my body—now. That he would keep her as close as he could forever having any nich that came between them. This caused me a herce, ashing pain. The delicate heart in my thin chest shuddered. It had never been broken before and it didn't understand this memory.

It made me serry to realize that I star loved Jared. I wasn't free of that, wasn't free of jealousy for the body be loved. My glance thekered back to Mel. I saw the ructual twist of the mouth that used to be mine and knew she understood.

I continued quickly around the classer of faces orcling my bed, while Doc, after a palise answered my question

Trudy and Geot rey, Heath Paige and Andy Brandt even "Jud. didn't respond. We kep trying as long as we could."

Was Iodi gone, thene I wondered my inexperienced heart throbbing. I was giving the poor frail thing such a rough awaken og

Heidi and Lily Lily smiling a pained little smile in none the less sincere for the pain (a).

While my new heart ached harder than it had ever ached—ached for a woman 1 dinever known — my eves continued around the circle and then froze.

Jodi, clinging to Kyle's side, stared back at me

She smiled tentatively and suddenly I recognized her

"Sunny!"

"I got to stay" she said, not quite smag but almost "Just like you". She glanced at Kyle's face — which was more store than I was used to seeing it — and her voice turned sad. "I'm trying though. I am looking for her I will keep looking."

"Kyle had as put Surray back when it looked like we would lose Jods," Doe continued quietly.

I stared at Sunny and Kvie for a moment, stunned, and then finished the circle.

Ian was watching me with a strange combination of loy and ner vousness. Has face was higher than it should have been, higger than it back to be. But his eyes were still the blue I remembered. The anchor that held me to this planet.

"You okay in there?" he asked.

"I I don't know." I admitted "This feels very weard. Every bit as weird as switching species. So much weirder than I would have thought, I ... I don't know."

My heart if thered again looking two those eyes, and this was no memory of another lifet me's love. My mouth feet dry and my stomach quivered. The place where his arm touched my back telt more alive than the rest of my body.

"You don't mind staying here too much do you. Wanca? Do you

think that maybe you could tolerate it-" he marmated

Jamie squeezed my land. Melanie put hers on top of his then smiled when lared added his to the pile. Trudy parted my foot. Geot.

frey. Heath, Heidi, Andy Paige, Brandt and even Lily were beaming at me. Kyle bad shuffled closer a grin spreading across his face. Sunby's smile was the smue of a coconspirator.

How much No Pain had Doc given me? Everything was glowing.

lan brushed the cloud of golden hair back from my face and laid his hand on my cheek. His hand was so big just the palm covered from my jaw to my forehead, the contact sent a joil of electricity through my slivery skin. It tingled after that first job, and the pit of my stomach tingled along with it

I could tee in water flush panking my cheeks. My heart had never been broken before, but it had also never flown. It made me shy I had a hard time finding my voice

"I suppose I could do that " I whispered. "If it makes you happy "

"That's not good enough, actually " Ian disagreed "It has to make you happy, too."

I could only meet his gaze for a few seconds at a time, the shyness, so new and confusing to me, had my eyes dropping to my lap again and again.

"I think it might." I agreed "I think it might make me very very happy."

Happy and sau, elated and miserable, secure and afraid, loved and denied, patient and angry, peacetal and wild complete and empty all at it. I would feel everything. It would all he mine

Ian coaxed my face up until I looked him in the eyes, my checks flushing darker

"Then you will stay."

He kissed me, right in front of everyone, but I torgot the audience quickly. This was easy and right, no division, no confusion, no objection just lan and me, the moiten rock moving through this new body melding it into the pact.

"I wil. stay," I agreed.

And my tenth life began

Continued

ife and love went on in the last human outpost on the planet

Earth but things did not stay exactly the same

I was not the same

This was my first rebirth into a body of the same species. I tound the transfer much more utilical than changing planets because I had so many expects ions about being burnan a ready in place. Also, I'd inherited a lot of things from Petats Open to the Moon, and not all of them were pleasant.

I d inherited a great deal of grief for Cloud Spinner. I missed the mother I d never known and mourned for her suffer ng now. Perhaps there could be no joy on this planet without an equal weight of point to balance it out on some unknown scale.

I dinherited unexpected limitations. I was used to a body that was strong and tast and tall—a body that could run for miles, go without food and water lift heavy weights, and reach high shelves. This body was weak—and not rust physically. This body seized up with crip-

p. ng shyness evert time I was ansure of myself which seemed to be often these days,

I dinherited a different role in the homan commanity. People carried things for me now and let me pass first into a room. They gave me the easiest choices and then, half the time took the work right nut of my hands anyway. Worse than that I needed the help. My miscles were soft and not used to labor. I tired easily and my attempts to hide that tooled no one. I probably couldn't have run a mile without stopping.

There was more to this easy treatment than just my physical weakness, though I was used to a pretty face, but one that people were able to look at with fear, mistrust, even hatred. My new face defied such emotions.

People touched my checks of en, or put their fingers under my chin holding in viscoup to see a better. I was frequently patied on my head (which was in easy reach, since I was shorter than everyone but the children, and my hair was stroked so regularly that I stipped not ong when it happened. Those who had never accepted me before did this as often as my friends. Even Lucina put up only a token resistance when her children began to lowing the like two adoring puppies. Freedom, in particular, crawled onto my laplat every opportunity, burrowing his face in my hair Isatah was too big for such displays of affection, but he liked to hold my hand — last the same size as his while chartering excitedly with me about Spiders and Dragons, soccer and raids. The children still wouldn't go anywhere near Meannel their mother had frightened them too thoroughly before for her reassurances to change things now.

Even Maggie and Sharon, though they still tried not to look at me, could not maintain their former rigidity in my presence

My body was not the only change. The mansoons came late to the desert, and I was glad.

For one bing. I a never sme led the rain in the creosotes before — , could only vaguely temember it from my memories of Melanies memories a very din trail of recall indeed, and now the scent washed ou the musty caves, efficient sme ing fresh and almost sprey. The scent cleng to my hair and followed me everywhere I smc led it in my dreams.

Also. Perais Open to the Moon had lived in Searle at her ite and the anbroken streak of base skies and bastering heat was as bewildering a most manhing — to my system as the dark press of heavy overcast skies would have been to any of these descrit dwellers. The clouds were exciting, a change from the bland featureless pair blue. They had depth and movement. They made pictures in the sky

There was a great deal of reshuttling to be done in Jeb's caves, and the move to the big game room—now the communal sleeping quarters—was good preparation for more permanent arrangements to follow.

Every space was needed so moons could not remain vacant. Still, only the newcomers, Candy — who had remembered her correct name at last—and Lacey could bear to take Wess old space. I pitted Candy for her future roommale, but the Healer never betraved any discontent at the prospect.

When the rains ended Jamic would move into a free corner in Brandt and Aaron's cave. Melanie and Jaren had kicked Jamie out of their room and into Jan's before I dibect teborn to Pers body. Jamie wasn't so young that they dineeded to give him any excuse.

Kyle was working on widening the small crevice that had been Walter's sleeping space so that it would be ready when the desert was dry again It real wasn't big enough for more than one and Kyle would not be staying there alone

At hight in the game room. Sunny's ept curled into a ball against Kyle's chest, like a kitten who was triends with a big dog — a rottwer let whom she trusted implieitly. Sunny was a wave with Kyle. I couldn't remember ever seeing them unattached a nee I diopened these stact gray eyes for the first time.

Kyle seemed constantly bemused, toold stracted by this impossible relationship he couldn't quite wrap his head around to pay altent on to much else. He wasn't giving up on lode but as Sunny dung to him he he with the his side with genile hands.

Before the rain every space was taken, so I staved with Doc in the hospital that no longer frightened me. The cots were not comfortable but it was a very interesting place to be Cancy remembered the details of Summer Songs, to better than her own, the hospital was a place of miracles now.

After the rain. Dot would not be sleeping in the hospital anymore. The first night in the game room. Sharon had dragged her mattress right next to Doc's without a word of explanation. Perhaps it was Doc's fascination with the Healer toat motivated Sharon, though I doubted Doc had even noticed how pretty the older woman was his fascination was with her phenomenal knowledge. Or maybe it was just that Sharon was ready to forgive and forget. I hoped that was the case. It would be nice to think that even Sharon and Maggie might be soft ened over time.

I would not stay in the hospital anymore, either

The crucial conversation with lan might never have taken place if not for lamie. My mouth would go all dry and my palms would sweat whenever I so much as thought of bringing it up. What it those feelings in the hospital those few perfect moments of certainty right after I diawoken in this body had been illusion? What if I remembered them wrong? I knew that nothing had changed for melbut how could be certain Ian telt the same? The body he diffallen in love with was still right here.

I expected am to be unsettled—we an were If it was difficult for me, a soul used to such changes, how hard must it be for the humans?

I was working to put the last of the realousy and the perplexing echoes of the love I suit telt for Jared behind me. I didn't need or want them I an was the right partner for me. But sometimes I would catch myself staring at Jared and reci confused. I'd seen Me anie louch I ans arm or hand and then jerk away as if she'd suddenly remembered who she was Even Jared who had the least reason for uncertainty, would occasionally meet my confused gaze with a searching one of his own. And I am Of course it must have been hardest for him. I under stood that

We were together nearly as much as Kyle and Sunny Ian constantly touched my face and hair was always how ing my hands. But who did not respond to this body that way? And wasn't it platonic for everyone else? Why didn't he kiss me again the way he had that first day?

Maybe he could never love me inside this body as appealing as it seemed to be to a I the other humans here.

That worry was heavy in my beart the night lan had carned my cot—because it was too heavy for me—to the hig dark game room.

.

It was raining for the first time in more than six months. There were both faughter and complaints as people shook out their damp bedding and arranged their places. I saw Sharon with Dot and smiled

"Over here, Wanda." Jamie called, waving me toward where he d just set his mattress next to lank. "There's room for all three of us now."

Jamie was the one person who treated me almost exactly the same as before. He did make allowances for my puny physique, but he never seemed surprised to see me enter a room or shocked when Wanderer's words came through these lips.

"You don't really want that cot, do you, Wandar I'd bet we could all fit oway on the mattresses if we shoved them together." Jamie graned at me while he kinked one mattress into the other without waiting for agreement. "You don't take up much space."

He took the cot from Ian and set it on its side, out of the way. Then Janue stretched out on the very edge of the far mattress and turned his back to us.

"Oh, hey Ian," he added without turning. "I tasked to Brandt and Aaron, and I think I'm going to move in with them. Well, I'm beat Night, guys,"

I stated at Jamie's unmoving form for a long moment. Ian was just as motioniess. He couldn't have been having a panic attack root though. Was he thinking of some way to extricate himself from the situation?

"Lights out" Jeb bellowed from across the room. "Everybody shut yer trap so I can get some shut-eve."

People laughed, but took it in seriously as always. One by one the four lamps were dimmed until the room was black.

Jan's hand found mine it was warm. Did he notice how cold and sweaty my skin was?

He sank to his knees on the mattress tugging me gently along. I

followed and lay down on the seam between the beds. He kept my hand.

"Is this skave" Ian whispered. There were other hushed imversations going on around us, made indistinct by the rush of the saltur spring.

"Yes, thank you," I answered.

Jamie solled over, shaking the mattress and knocking into me "Oops, sorry. Wanda" he marmared, and then I heard him yawn

Automatically, I shifted out of his way. Ian was closer than I'd thought I gasped quetly when I ran into him then tried to give him some room. His arm was suddenly around me holding me to his body.

It was the strangest fee, ng, having Ian's arm around me in this very nonplatonic way reminded me oddly of my first experience with No Pain. Like I'd been in agony without real zing it, and his touth had taken all the bart away.

That feeling erased my shyness. I roded so that I was facing him, and he t gatened his arm around me

"Is this okey?" I whispered repeating his question.

He kissed my forehead "Better than Jkay"

We were stient for a few minutes. Most of the other conversations had died out

He bent down so that his lips were at my ear and w aspered quite eter than before "Wanda do you think -- ?" He tell sugnt

"Yes?"

"We all the looks are I have a room as to myself now. That's not right."

"No. There's not enough space for you to be a one."

"I don't want to be alone. But 🔒 "

Why wouldn't he ask? "But what?"

"Have you had enough time to sort things out yet? I don't want to rush you I know it's confusing with lared."

It took me a moment to process what he was saying but then I giggled quietly. Melanie wasn't much given to giggling, but Pet had been, and her body betrayed me at this most inopportune moment.

"What?" he demanded

"I was giving you time to sort things out." I explained in a whisper

"I didn't want to mish you — because I know it's confusing. With Mea

He amped just a little in surprise "You thought -- PBut Melanie isn't you. I was never confused."

I was smiling in the dark now "And Jared isn't you."

His voice was righter when he answered. "But he's still Jared. And you love him."

Ian was jealous against 1 shot ldn't have been pleased by negative emotions, but I had to admit this was encouraging

"Jared is my past, another life. You are my present."

He was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again his voice was rough with emotion. "And your fitture, it you want that "

"Yes, please."

And then be kissed me in the most unplatonic way possible under the crowded circumstances, and I was thruled to remember that I dibeen smart enough to be about my age.

Fire rains would end and when they did. Ian and I would be together partners in the truest sense. This was a promise and an obligation I had never had in all my lives. Thinking of it made me teel toyful and any our and shy and desperately impatient all at the same time made me feel *human*.

٠

After a this has been settled Ian and I were more inseparable than ever So when it came time for me to test my new face on the other souls, of course he went with me.

This raid was a relief for me after long weeks of trustration. It was bad enough that my new body was weak and nearly useless in the caves. I couldn't be leve it when the others didn't want to let me use my body for the one thing it was perfect for

Jared had specifically approved of Jamie's choice because of this gaineiess, valuerable lace that no one could ever do bt, this descate build that anyone would be motivated to protect, but even he had a hard time putting his theory laro practice. I was sure raiding would be every both as easy for me now as it had been before but Jared. Jeb Janier and the others in everyone but Jamie and Meditalious lepting to find a way around is not me for that it was ridications.

I saw them eyeing Sunny, but she was still unproven, not trusted. On top of that, Surny had absolutely no intention of setting one foot outside. The very word rate had her cowering in terror. Kyte would not go out with us. Sunny had gone his crical the one time he'd men tioned it.

In the end practicality had wor out I was needed

It was good to be needed.

Supplies had been dwindling this would be a long, thorough trip lared was teating the raid, as usual, so it went without saying that Melanie was included. Aaron and Brandt volunteered, not that we really needed the muscle, they were tired of being cooped up.

We were going far to the north, and I was excited to see the new places—to fee, the cold again.

Excitement got a bit out of hand in this body. I was bounce and hyper the right we drove to the rock slide where the van and the big moving truck were hadden. Ian was laughing at me because I could hardly hold still as we loaded the clothes and sundnes we would need into the van. He held my hand, he said, to tether me to the surface of the planet.

Was I too loud? Too collivious to my surroundings? No of course that was not at There was nothing I could have done. This was a trap and it was too, ate for us the minute we arrived.

We froze when the thin beams of a ghr shot our of the darkness into fareus and Melanie's faces. My face my eyes, the ones that might have he ped as staved obset red, hidden in the shadow made by lans wide back.

My eyes were not bunded by the glare and the moon was bright enough for me to clearly see the Seekers that outnumbered us eight to our six. Bright enough for me to see the way they held their hands, to see the whapons that gonted at them raised and pointed at us. Pointed at Jaren and Mel. at Brandt and Aaron our only gun still undrawn and one centered dead on Jan's chest.

Why had I et him come with mer Why Jie he have to die toor. Livs bewildered questions echoed in my head. Why did life and love go on? What was the point?

My fragric little heart shattered into a mullion pieces, and I tumoled for the pill in my pocket

"Steady, now everybody just keep caim," the man in the center of the group of Seekers called out. "Walt wait control scalablearing any thing! Jeez, get a grip! No, look!"

The man turned the flashlight on his own face

His face was sun browned and eraggy, are a rock that had been eroued by the wind. His hair was dark with white at the temptes, and it curted in a bushy mess around his ears. And his eyes — his eyes were dark brown. List dark brown nothing more.

"See?" he said. "Okay now you don't shoot us, and we won't shoot you. See?" And he laid the gun he was carrying to the ground. "C mon, guys." he said, and the others shoutheir guns back into holsters—on their hips, their arikles, their backs—so many weapons.

"We found your cache here—clever that, we were locky to find it—and decided we'd hang out and make your acquaintance. It's not every day you find another rebelies." He laughed a delighted laugh that came from deep in his belig. "Look at your faces! What? Did you to not you all were the only ones stark ckin?" He laughed again.

None of us had moved an .nch.

"Throx they re in shock. Nate" another man said

"We scared them half to Jearh," a woman said, "What do you expect?"

They waited, shuffling from foot to foot, while we stood frozen fared was the first to recover. "Who are your" he whispered

The leader laughed again. "I'm Nate—it ice to meet you, though you might not feel the same way just yet. This here's Rob. Evan Blake. Tom Kim and Rachel along with me." He gestured around the group as he spoke, and the homans noduced at their names. I noticed one man all the othe back, whom Nate and not introduce. He had bright crinkly ginger hair that stood out — especially because he was the tallest in the group. He alone seemed to be unarried. He was also staring intently at me, so I looked away. "There's twenty two of us altogether, though," Nate continued.

Nate held out his hand.

Jareu toos a Leep breath and then a step forward. When he moved, he rest of our lade group's lent viewhaled all at once

"I'm Jared." He shook Nate's hand then started to smile. "This is

Melanie. Aaron. Brandt Ian. and Wanda. There are thirty seven of as altogether."

When lared spoke my name Ian shifted his weight trying to obscure me completely from the other namans' view. It was an vithen that I realized I was still in last as much danger as the others would have been in I these bad been Scekers. Jis lake in the deginning I tried to hold perfectly still.

Nate blacked at lared's revention, and then his eyes widened "Wow That's the first time I we ever been one-upped on that one."

Now Jared blanked. "You've found inherse"

"There are three other ceas separate from ours that we know of Eleven with Gail, seven with Russell and eighteen with Max. We keep in touch. Even trade now and then "Again the behy laugh, "Gail's little Ellen decided she wanted to keep company with my Evan here, and Carios took up with Russell's Cindy. And of course, every one needs. Burns now and then —" He stopped talking abrup, yig ancing uneastry around him, as if he disabl something he shouldn't have. His eyes rested briefly on the tall redhead in the back, who was still starting at me.

"Might as well get that out of the way" the small dark man at Nate's elbow said.

Nate shot a suspicious glance across our little the "Okay Rob's right. Let's get this out there" He took a deep breath "Now, you at just take it easy and hear us out. Calmy, please. This appets people sometimes."

"Every time." the one named Rob muttered. His hand drifted to the holster on his thigh.

"What?" Jared asked in a flat voice

Nate signed and then gestured to the tau man with the ginger red hair. The man stepped torward, a wry smue on his face. He had treckles, like me only thousands more. They were scattered so thick across his aut that he looked dark skinned, though he was fair. His eyes were dark—navy blue maybe.

"This here is Britis. Now he's with us, so don't go crazy. He's my hest friend is saved my I fe a hundred times. He's one of our family and we contitake kindly to it when people try to kill him."

One of the women slowly pulsed her gain out and held a pointed at the ground.

The redhead spoke for the first time in a distinctly gentle tenor voice "No, it's okay Nate. See? They we got one of their own." He pointed straight at me and Ian tensed. "Looks like I'm not the only one who signe native."

Burns granned at me, then crossed the empty space, the no-man's land between the two tribes, with his hand stretched out roward me

I stepped out from around Ian ignoring his muttered warning, abruptly comfortable and sure.

I ked the way Barns had phrased it Gone native

Burns stopped in front of mellowering his hand a oit to compensate for the considerable difference in our heights. I took his hand a state was hard and callused next to my delicate skip and shook it

"Burns Living Flowers," he introduced himself

My eyes withened at his name. Fire World — now unexpected "Wanderer," I told him.

"It's extraordinary to meet you. Wanderer And here I thought I was one of a kind."

"Not even close" I said, thinking of Sunny back in the caves. Per haps we were none of us as rare as we thought

He raised an eyebrow at my answer intrigued.

"Is that so?" he said "Well maybe there's some hope for this planet, after al."

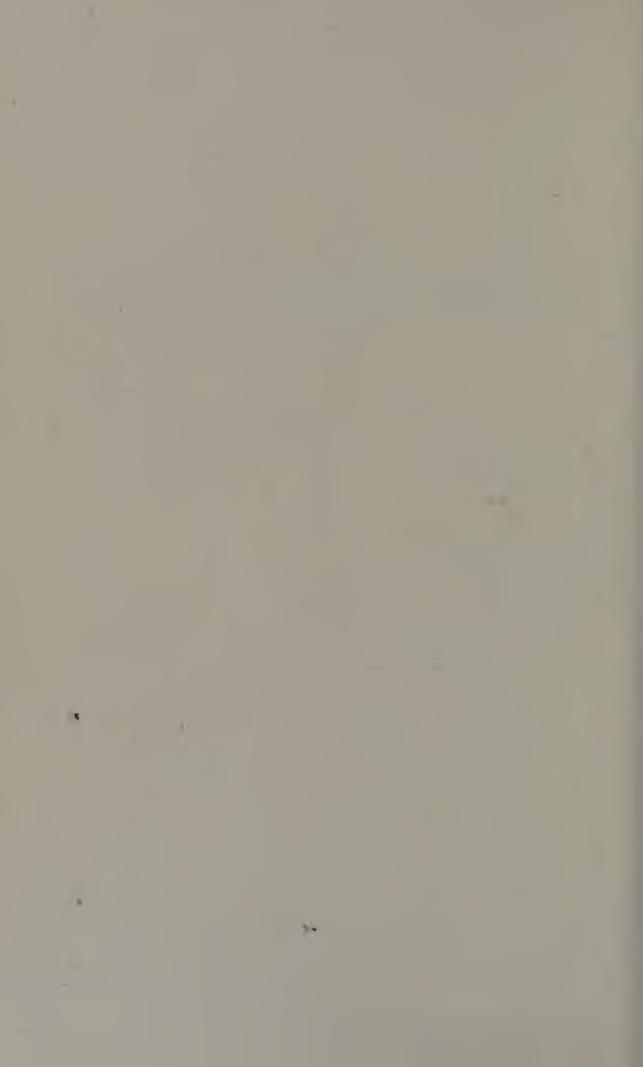
"It's a strange world." I murmured, more to mysell than to the other native soul

"The strangest," he agreed

ROHTUA BHT TLOBA

STEPHEN E MEYER graduated from Brigham Young University with a degree in English steriture. She lives with her husband and three sons in Arizona. Read more about Stephenie and her other books at www.stepheniemeyer.com.





South San Francisco Public Library One of the most compolling of our time, Stephenie Mayer brings ting and unforgettable novel about to stence of love and the very assence of what it means to be human.



STEPHENIE MEYER is the author of the bestselling Twitight series. She graduated from Brigham Young University with a degree in English literature and now lives in Arizona with her husband and three young sons. This is her first novel for adults. For more about Stephenie Meyer, please visit www.stepheniemeyer.com.

Also available



THE REPORT OF THE PROPERTY OF

"Stephenie Meyer is an amazing phenomenon out of the brightness of her mind and spirit comes the illuminated darkness of her stories. For no matter how much pain her characters suffer. Meyer infuses the tales with light and hope."

ORBER SCOTT CARD, WITHER OF THE CORE SAME

"A fantastic, inventive, thoughtful, and powerful novel. The Host should come with a warning label: it will grab you and keep you reading well into the wee hours of night, and keep you thinking, deeply, hauntingly, well after the final word. Stephenie Meyer captures characters and handles story line like a master—a hybrid combination of Stepheni King and Isaac Asimov."

BURKE BEAUSON ANTHONOR WILLER WEREAU

"A fascinating, passionate, and unique psychological thriller. In *The Host*, Stephenie Meyer gives a new and surprising meaning to the phrase being of two minds!!"

BATHERUSE NEWTON AUTHOR OF THE ETYPIC

